

Bridging Worlds: A Korean-American Perspective on Modern Korea

Henry Landay 00:01

All right, we're on. Okay, my name is Henry Landay. I'm a senior here at Colby, and I'm here with Geunghyul Park, a fellow student at Colby. This interview will contribute to an oral history project devoted to understanding the Korean experience and culture and how those two things persist and change under a variety of influences, abroad and domestic. Oral histories provide a valuable means of documenting individual narratives that reflect broader cultural and historical processes, and this interview aims to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of how Korean identity is experienced, preserved and transformed across different social environments. Together, we'll explore Geunghyul's family history, the challenges and opportunities he faced as a Korean-American person in the US, and the ways he navigated life as an American-Korean in South Korea. Through his story, we hope to gain a deeper insight into how individuals experience cultural identity, not just as something inherited, but as something constantly negotiated in different social and cultural contexts.

Okay, awesome. So just to start off, could you just tell me a little bit about your background, where you grew up, and your family?

Geunghyul Park 01:15

Yeah, of course. I was born in Korea, in Incheon, which is kind of a port city, Northwestern South Korea. I moved to the US when I was two and a half years old. My parents were missionaries, so they came to the US to serve a Korean church in Arlington, Massachusetts, which is where I grew up, and I lived there for 15, almost 15 years, and then when I was in the middle of my junior year, my family moved back to South Korea. Honestly, I don't think I would have much to say if I hadn't had that experience.

Henry Landay 02:01

That's cool. I'm from Newton, so...

Geunghyul Park 02:04

Oh, really? Yeah, awesome.

Henry Landay 02:07

That's cool. Then did kind of growing up as a child of missionaries and in the church, was that a big part of your childhood?

Geunghyul Park 02:19

Definitely was, especially peak of my dad's missionary work. So, there was a six-to-eight-year period where my dad stayed with one church, which was the longest time he had stayed with

one church. I would go to church, Wednesday, Friday, and Sunday. Basically, stay there a whole evening after school. I just got to hang out there, on Wednesdays, less so: I'd just be there for two hours. But Friday nights, every Friday night, I was there for ages, elementary school to end of middle school.

Henry Landay 03:00

That must have been such a community.

Geunghyul Park 03:03

It was a great community. It was a pretty small church. We shared a building with a Lutheran church, and the Lutheran church had it the mornings, and then we would have it in the afternoons. And it was really cool because I grew up with the other pastor's kids, the other PKs. And yeah, got very close to them.

Henry Landay 03:27

Yeah, awesome. And then who were some of the most influential people in your life, either as you grew up or later in life, and what role did they play?

Geunghyul Park 03:43

Yeah, I would definitely say my dad has had the biggest influence on me. I think I'm the most similar to him. Like, I look like him, I talk like him, I think like him. I think we just naturally mesh because of that. And yeah, we always would do activities together. I remember one of my fondest childhood memories is he woke me up at 4 AM to go squid fishing with him. And it was like a school night, too. It was a school day. And he woke me up at 4 AM, we went squid fishing, came back home, ate breakfast, and I had the whole school day ahead of me, and that was really fun.

Henry Landay 04:23

Yeah, that's a great memory. Yeah, that's awesome. So kind of just moving on into... You grew up in the US, obviously, and having not much experience actually being in South Korea, I was wondering if you could tell me about a time, if there was any, that you felt like your Korean identity was either questioned, challenged, or even confirmed, either in the US or maybe when you return to South Korea.

Geunghyul Park 04:59

Yeah, there were definitely times like that. Going to a Korean church, I was kind of distant... I felt very disconnected from it, just because the Korean church culture felt like we were grasping at straws. Because most of the kids there, even the middle aged people, they were

very bad at Korean. I was very grateful because my parents, they grew up, they lived their whole lives in Korea, and then came here, and I was only allowed to speak Korean at home anyways. So, my Korean is very well preserved compared to some of my other peers that I grew up next to. And, I mean I really did end up abandoning a lot of my Korean identity, if you can call it that, growing up in America. I really wouldn't... I don't know if Korean-American is the best term, because there's kinda a contradiction, a dichotomy there. It's very well-melded to the point where I think a lot more like someone from Arlington. It's sort of a given, just because I grew up there for so... I lived there for so long. But yeah, smaller, more comfort related things like the food I eat, that I grew up eating, kind of the way I talk at home, home culture, kind of my family, you know, of course, they're all Korean. So there's a... It wasn't exactly confusing, or I had a crisis with it. It's just, I think I really accepted everything that happened. I was okay with it.

Henry Landay 06:04

Yeah, I mean, from what I know about Arlington, it's not... there aren't... there are obviously Korean people there. But I would say, it's not a very Korean place. And so, was church most of your interaction with Korean people, or did many — I don't know if you went to Arlington High — but were there many Korean people there? Were you friends with them? If you could just talk to me about that.

Geunghyul Park 07:19

I think I would say, as I grew up, I grew apart from a lot of my church friends. We kind of took different routes, socially. Honestly, I didn't really get along with them after a certain point — after middle school — and church was really my only interaction with Korean people. I think Arlington is 85% white, and like 5% Asian, and then other stuff.

Henry Landay 07:51

It's a Boston suburb. Yeah, totally fair. What do you remember about your family, about how your family talked about being Korean, or being American while you were growing up? What was kind of your family's perspective on that versus yours?

Geunghyul Park 08:09

Yeah, a lot of the perspective on it really shifted. I think initially, my parents were really focused on preserving our Korean ability. There wasn't really that much of an identity part of it where they're like, "Oh, we have a Korean identity that we want to preserve." It was... It's much more relaxed in than that. It was just natural. Because, you know, my mom knew how to cook Korean food. She would cook Korean food. We all knew how to speak Korean. We would speak Korean. My family was all in Korea so we would visit Korea every once in a while. It was a lot more of that, rather than active reinforcement. I think after my whole family became citizens, it shifted a little bit to where my dad, for example, he would... He got really into being

an American. He got into that for a while and then... but there were small things that he would always cling on to: like specific table manners or using chopsticks. Small things like that, that he...

Henry Landay 09:19

And what do you mean by "He got attached to being American"? What...

Geunghyul Park 09:24

He felt a lot more... I think he felt a lot more comfortable, getting attached to America. Because before then, you know, we did have our green... we did get our green cards pretty early on. But even then, my dad was a little scared that maybe eventually, we might move back to Korea if the missionary work doesn't work out for an entire career, or if something or another happens. So, maybe there was some thinking on his part around that. But after he became a citizen... For example, during COVID my dad had to stop the missionary work, because he... The church downsized, and he got laid off. He was one of the assistant pastors there. But actually, no. He was in charge of the college youth group, and because no Korean students were coming to colleges in the US, he kind of didn't have a position there. So, I think after that, he started doing home appliance repair, and that was really when he started embracing his American side, because he wasn't really talking to as many Korean people. Everyone he went to home appliance repair school with was a bunch of Hispanic people — a lot of blue collar guys. I think he really enjoyed that, to be honest with you. So, I think, there's an aspect where he became a citizen, he wasn't exposed to as many Korean people, and then he just had a great time with his... with his Dominican friends.

Henry Landay 11:10

Yeah, awesome. So that means, right now, you're all citizens, including yourself?

Geunghyul Park 11:18

Yeah.

Henry Landay 11:18

So, does that make you a dual citizen or...?

Geunghyul Park 11:21

Yeah. No, I gave up my Korean citizenship when I was 16, because if you kind of leave it past your 17th birthday, you kind of go in the Korean government's countdown because on your 18th birthday, they send you mail saying you have to go to the army within this time scale to... You have to do your mandatory service within this time scale. And then, the appeal process gets really complicated from there. So, I just... We just retro... We just preemptively gave up my citizenship. I'm just a US citizen now.

Henry Landay 11:59

So how did that work when you moved to South Korea? Were you on just a visa then?

Geunghyul Park 12:06

Yeah, it was actually really tough for a while, because, for example, my siblings are still dual citizens, and my mom... Actually, my mom doesn't have citizenship. She didn't get it when my dad did.

Henry Landay 12:19

So, she doesn't have it in South Korea or...?

Geunghyul Park 12:22

In the US.

Henry Landay 12:23

Okay.

Geunghyul Park 12:23

She's on a green card in the in the US, and she's a Korean citizen, so it was fine for her and my siblings, but I had already renounced my citizenship at the time. So, I was... because we moved to South Korea, because it was a really rough time for my family. Like my parents split, and then there was... We had a lot of financial troubles, so we had to relocate to South Korea. For the first three months there, actually, I just dropped out of Arlington High. I didn't have a high school I had to go to either. So, I couldn't get a student visa either. So, for the first nine months-ish [that] I was in Korea, I'd have to leave the country for one day and then come back just the next day, which is a...

Henry Landay 13:16

Wait, leave the country. How often?

Geunghyul Park 13:18

Every three months.

Henry Landay 13:19

Oh, whoa.

Geunghyul Park 13:20

Yeah. So, I remember first three months I was... I went to this... I didn't have... So I left the US middle of my junior year, so December — late December, three days before Christmas — got

to South Korea, and then for three months, I didn't really do anything. It was like... there wasn't a school I could immediately enroll into at the time. So I was doing nothing. And then I went to... where did I go? I went to... oh I went to Cambodia, because we have family friends in Cambodia. I was there for a little bit, came back to Korea. It was like... it's actually kind of a weird loophole, because you can only stay in Korea without a visa for three months at a time, but if you step out of the country for one second, it resets. And I came back, and three months later I had... I went to Japan for a day, just like on my own. That was actually a lot of fun, a day trip to Japan, came back. I did that for three times, and then finally I got my visa approved in Korea, so I didn't have to do that anymore. But before that, it was... it was really an unstable time in my family's life. I guess you could call it that. Just because, my mom, when we first moved to Korea, she... so there's this very street food in Korea. But one big thing during the winter is *Bungeoppang* (붕어빵 a fish-shaped pastry filled with red-bean paste), which is like it's a fish shaped pastry with red bean paste on the inside. It's really popular in the in the winter. And she rented out one of those carts. She sold those for a while, and then she became a preschool teacher after that. But she did various things. It was very unstable. It was like, day to day. I had a really rough time. So did everyone else in my family. This is, a fun fact I like to throw out is first three months in Korea, I got addicted to this video game called Crusader Kings Two, and within those three months, I racked up 350 hours on it, which is a lot of hours.

Henry Landay 15:45

That's a week!

Geunghyul Park 15:57

So...

Henry Landay 15:48

That sounds incredibly challenging, and I don't know...

Geunghyul Park 15:54

It was a lot to process, yeah.

Henry Landay 15:56

Yeah what was... was that kind of how you dealt with that, just like, finding respite in different activities, or like... Because I assume... Sorry, sorry to step over you. But I was just gonna say from an outside perspective, it would feel like, "Alright, I don't know anybody here other than my family." I assume, like, I guess you have pretty good Korean, but like, you're just coming from an outside... as an outsider. So yeah, I guess kind of, what was that like?

Geunghyul Park 16:30

Yeah, because I really enjoyed my time at Arlington High. Like, I had a lot of friends. I really enjoyed my classes. So going to Korea, I didn't know anyone there. My family all knew me, but like, I haven't seen them in a while. Also, it's like, "Oh, I used to change your diapers when you're two." So it's like, I don't really know them right. At the same time, I don't have anything to do all day. So I'm just entirely in my own head for those three months. So my coping strategies were really bad, I just played video games all day. But... it was a really rough transition: culturally, socially, within my own family too. Because actually also my grandpa had a heart attack during like, a month after we moved to Korea, which is actually... It was like a blessing in disguise that we moved because he had for a week before, he said "My chest feels weird." My mom forced him to go to the hospital and they caught it early and then he didn't die. So, it was... it was a lot of emotions all at once.

Henry Landay 17:52

Wait, so did you come back with your dad, or did you just go back with your mom and your siblings?

Geunghyul Park 17:58

I went back with my mom and my siblings. My dad stayed in America for a while. He is in Romania right now. He's just been traveling around for a while.

Henry Landay 18:07

Doing church work or...?

Geunghyul Park 18:09

Not really. He hasn't done church work since COVID, but he's still doing something.

Henry Landay 18:16

And so when you returned to Korea, did the church... was that a community that you fell back on?

Geunghyul Park 18:25

Yeah, definitely. So one thing I'm very grateful about is when we first kind of... When my mom first deduced that we probably have to go back to Korea, she told our head pastor at the church we were going to and he actually, without us knowing, he gathered \$3,000 and gave us 3k. Because we actually left for Korea on three weeks notice.

Henry Landay 18:59

Wow.

Geunghyul Park 18:59

So my mom told me we had to go back to Korea first week of December — like end of first week of December — and then on the 21st of December, we left.

Henry Landay 19:10

So you're out before Christmas.

Geunghyul Park 19:12

Out before Christmas, yeah.

Henry Landay 19:13

Wow. That must have been incredibly isolating to get to Korea. And... Wow. Did speaking the language kind of help ease that landing at all?

Geunghyul Park 19:28

I think it definitely did. I really can't imagine what it would have been like if I wasn't able to speak Korean in the way I was. I was very conversational, and I guess I was still kind of angry at myself, because I am kind of proud of how I speak in English. It's like, I feel like I have a bigger vocabulary on average. I enjoy writing. I enjoy poetry. So, going to Korea and I was, like, airing my frustrations. I was like, "Oh, I can't speak Korean well." Everyone else would be like, "You speak fine". I was like, "Oh, but I can't, like, understand novels in Korean." And that was the standard I was going off of. So I was a little harder on myself than I probably should have been. At the same time, the frustration is still there. Although, of course, I can't imagine what it would have been like if I went without being able to speak Korean well.

Henry Landay 20:31

Yeah, they're super difficult. How did... Because then the next year you were able to enroll in high school. How did that kind of change your experience of Korea?

Geunghyul Park 20:45

It was really frustrating for me because I thought it would change a lot, but it really didn't. As I mentioned, that three month period after I got to Korea and then I was able to enroll into the second semester of a really small International School. So for example, my graduating class was 13 people including me. And it was a K-12 school, so all of them had been going to that school since sixth grade. So, all those relationships were already built. I kind of went in there, not really knowing how high schoolers talk in Korea, like what they're interested in, and it was really tough in the beginning, I would say. That was another struggle I went through. Then, you know, I just did okay. I'm not really close to them still, but like when I went there, I would talk to them, yeah.

Henry Landay 21:43

So you're... Are you still in contact with your Arlington High friends?

Geunghyul Park 21:47

I am, yeah. I'm actually gonna go stay over at their place during Fall Break. So looking forward to that.

Henry Landay 21:54

Yeah, that'll be great. So that means... I guess... This will be a pretty open ended question, but it kind of goes...

Geunghyul Park 22:03

I feel like I've been taking these questions a lot more open endedly. Like, I forget the question...

Henry Landay 22:04

That's exactly what you should be doing. This next one is like, what is home to you? Either where is it or who is it with? And kind of, how has that changed over time, or even become solidified even through these experiences and through your childhood?

Geunghyul Park 22:31

That's a good question. That's a tough one for me, because if you had asked me probably five years ago, I would just say, "Home is like Arlington, I live here." But, I think since five years ago, my parents started having problems with each other, and my dad moved away, and since then, it's been a lot more tumultuous, generally, as as it would be. And, just like having that experience, and then also very soon after that, in the great scheme of things, moving to Korea. And also, when we first moved to Korea, we stayed at my grandparents apartment for a while. So we did that for two months, and then my grandparents rented out an apartment for us, so we moved there, and they found like a better price, so we moved there again. So we've moved like two, three times already in Korea. So even even in Korea, it was hard to adjust. But I think... really you know, it's like a more generic answer, but I really think it rings true that home is where the people you feel comfortable are, with are: my mom, my dad, my siblings, wherever they are.

Henry Landay 24:00

That's awesome. And like, through those... Obviously they were trying times and not even past tense... They are. It's like, a difficult situation. Were there any... Are there any times that come to mind where, like, you specifically remember feeling either a sense of belonging, or specifically feeling like you don't belong, either in Korea or in the United States

Geunghyul Park 24:32

Yeah, um... I think when I first started feeling a sense of belonging was, actually, I had a girlfriend for a while in Korea, and — she's my ex now — but when I would hang out with her was like, I think that's when I first started to accept Korea a little bit. I became more comfortable with it. My speaking skills improved a lot, too just because I was, like, talking to her in Korean. I think that experience was really positive for me. Like my mom has pointed out this out too, like it was really turning a new leaf for me, even though I did really hate every other aspect of Korea, like I had that so...

Henry Landay 24:33

Yeah, that's totally valid. Feel... Be completely... Do you still feel that way? And how do you see your relationship with Korea right now?

Geunghyul Park 24:33

That's a good question. My family did kind of poke fun on me a little bit about this. They're like, "You must be so happy that you're leaving." Because, I was very expressive about the fact that I had a rough time here in Korea. And I think everyone acknowledged that, because my whole family felt it. Yeah, having that... even that little aspect of positive experience in Korea, improving my language — Korean speaking skills — is a big thing that I'm really grateful of. Looking forward, looking back. Because, really, I was kind of scared of my Korean ability when I first went home, because I had to use a lot of my brain to communicate with my grandparents, etc. But, really grateful about that. You know, I try to be as grateful as possible, because outcomes wise everything worked out. Like, I'm at a great school. I have a great financial aid package here. Moving to Korea didn't really mess up that much for me long term. So, I try to be as positive as possible. But, of course, I would never want to live in Korea long term, right? But before I moved to Korea, that was always something on my kind. Like, maybe I could live in Korea. Maybe that's... maybe I would want to work in Korea for a little bit, because I have those language skills. That's something my grandparents really encouraged. Now I kind of know, okay, I wouldn't live there long term. But at the same time, I learned to appreciate a lot more about Korea, I think. Like learn more about it, just have more of a concrete idea of what it is, therefore be able to know what I don't like about it, but also really appreciate all that it has going on.

Henry Landay 27:44

Yeah, that's awesome. That's a great answer. You kind of talked about how growing up in the US, your parents kind of used, the Korean language and Korean food and different cultural traditions to anchor you to that, kind of, those roots. I was wondering if like you kind of used any other things when you moved to Korea to kind of anchor you back to what felt like home here in the US. Or kind of... Kind of generally, how did you kind of, yeah stay connected to the US?

Geunghyul Park 28:30

Yeah, I think a lot of it was innate. Like I to listen... The music I listened to, things I was interested in, books I was reading was very, very Arlington, very that, sort of... The sort of things that Koreans would not typically do, of course. But also at the same time, I would FaceTime my Arlington friends really often. I think I'd say a positive thing that we keep up now that, now that, everyone is scattered, I still FaceTime them pretty often. Keeping in touch with the people I knew in America was, I think, a really big part of that for me. Yeah, it was a lot easier to me and a lot more natural to cling on to the American side of me in Korea than it would have been to cling on to the Korean side of me in America, just because I moved to America when I was two and a half years old. I really don't have any memories of it, of that time. The first initial years.

Henry Landay 29:39

Yeah, I can also... I can imagine that... It must been... Felt way more isolating, isolated to be away from your friends while they're having their senior year in high school than when you're all away from each other during freshman year. I was gonna move on to kind of talk about your family. So I was just wondering... We talked a little bit about your parents immigration story. Your dad was a missionary. It sounds like your mom just followed him here.

Geunghyul Park 30:15

Yeah.

Henry Landay 30:17

Can you tell me what you know about their childhood and kind of what preceded that, and maybe just what you know there?

Geunghyul Park 30:25

Of course. Yeah, so my dad grew up in very rough household, as I kind of roughly wrote down. He... His dad was, I think he was either 17 or 18 when he had my dad and my grandma was in her early 20s. It was really the rough side was mostly on my paternal grandmother's side. For example, she was living on her own at the time, and the reason was, her older brother had sexually assaulted her, her older sister. She was running away from that sort of environment. And, you know, my dad grew up with practically a single mom. She did remarry a few times, but he, from my experience with my dad, he never really accepted them as his dad. And, yeah, he grew up in mostly around the Incheon area... the North... Because Korea really only has two metropolitan areas. Greater Seoul metropolitan area, which would include Incheon, in my opinion. Then like Busan, which is in the south, like other cities like Gyeonggi, but those, those get really looked down on because their populations are really small. But administratively, they're considered on the same level. But yeah, mostly around that area of the North, Northwestern South Korea. He... Honestly, I don't know that much about his childhood, just

because he was pretty reluctant to talk about it to me, just because I was younger when I lived with him, and, I guess, it's a very heavy subject obviously, so...

Geunghyul Park 32:19

But occasionally, when I like talk to him, he'll drop some pieces of lore. That's always interesting, but he went to high school in... I think I mentioned Bupyeong, which is a smaller city to the east of Incheon. It's known as a pretty rough area, as far as Korea gets rough. A lot of poverty, lot of organized crime goes on there. Like, for example, I think my paternal grandfather was... He was like a hooligan in in high school. He was involved in organized crime organizations. Although he was pretty well off. His family is pretty well off, and he is well off now. But, for example, he has a giant dragon tattoo on his back, which is very rare for someone of his age, and, in that era, and that's 100% related to the lifestyle he probably had when he was younger. Of course, a lot of this is inference, because only met my paternal grandfather twice in my life. Once when I was three and once when I was 15. So, I don't know that much about him, but from what I heard from my dad, and from the one time I like talked to him, because we hung out for a whole day once when I was 15. So he told me a lot of stories, that was very interesting. That's my dad's side. And then did you want me to get into...

Henry Landay 32:19

Yeah, let's... It sounds like... It sounded from some preliminary conversations that you knew a little more about your mom's side of the family...

Geunghyul Park 32:19

Yeah.

Henry Landay 32:19

Definitely.

Henry Landay 33:13

But for now, let's just start with your mom and... Yeah.

Geunghyul Park 34:17

Actually, there's a little more about my dad's side of the family.

Henry Landay 34:22

Sure.

Geunghyul Park 34:23

My dad has two siblings. Both of his younger siblings are very much significantly younger than him and they have different dads, but he has a great relationship with them. And then my

paternal grandfather, his family, was very prominent and well off, because during the Japanese occupation, one of my ancestors was paramilitary police. He went to the Japanese Imperial Military Academy. That's... It's like a fun fact, interesting snippet.

Henry Landay 35:04

So he was part of, like, the police force in South Korea post war.

Geunghyul Park 35:10

Yeah.

Henry Landay 35:11

Wow, that's super interesting. Do you know any more about that?

Geunghyul Park 35:15

Not really. Like I mentioned, like, I've only met my paternal grandfather twice in my life. That's all I remember from that conversation. Yeah.

Henry Landay 35:24

Totally fair.

Geunghyul Park 35:25

But yeah, on my mother's side, my mom grew up in Incheon... This one neighborhood of Incheon called Hagik-dong. I can write that down for you later if you want. But that area... My mom's whole family just stayed in that area their whole their whole lives. When my maternal grandparents were younger, they lived in in Paju, which is a little more north. It's right on the North Korean border. My mom would tell me stories of when she went up to her parents hometown when she was younger, the police would pay her to — her and her friends — to go up to the mountains and pick up North Korean propaganda leaflets that they scattered. They would pick them up and if they got a certain number, the police would buy them ice cream. That's what they did when they went back to the countryside for a little bit.

Henry Landay 36:29

What do you think was the point of that?

Geunghyul Park 36:32

Well, I mean, because they were both sending propaganda to each other back and forth at the time. This is very early on when South Korea had surpassed North Korea economically, because that didn't really happen for a surprisingly long time.

Henry Landay 36:50

Yeah, not till the 1970s.

Geunghyul Park 36:52

Yeah not till the 70s. So... At the time, North Korea was still sending over a lot of leaflets promoting defection to North Korea. Kind of mocking South Korea as like a satellite country to America. A lot of that kind of stuff. That's never a good look for a country, especially, I would think, like Police Force station right on the border would be a lot more sensitive to that. So, my mom always tells me, she used to, when she was really little, like eight, she would go up to the mountain with her friends and pick up pick up leaflets, bring them back to the police, and they buy her an ice cream. That was her entertainment for the day. But

Henry Landay 37:39

That's a good story.

Geunghyul Park 37:41

Yeah, my mom also has two siblings, younger. Both my parents are the eldest children, and... My mom just went to high school in Hagik-dong, grew up there her whole life. She had a very typical life for someone of her generation, from her area. She's... She is the most stereotypical Korean, like Korean lady of born in the 80s that I can think of like I've met all her friends. Her name is Chi-He, and she said that five of her friends, in high school had the same name as her. So it's like, it's like an Emily or a Sophia that we can think of, I guess that would be the equivalent. But, yeah, my grandparents on my mom's side. My grandpa grew up in Paju. So did my grandma. And my grandmother was a little more middle class by their... By the era's standards. Of course, Korea was really dirt poor at the time. Even Ethiopia was sending humanitarian aid to South Korea at the time, which is a fun fact my grandma always likes to bring up I was like, is that. But my grandpa, my grandpa, was dirt poor, even by those standards, at the time. His whole family was like, were like, subsistence farmers. They would grow what they would eat. They didn't really earn any money, didn't sell anything or buy anything. And I think both my grandparents, on my mom's side have six siblings. I think my grandfather is the third, or he's the fourth kid, and then my grandmother is the third of seven each, respectively. My maternal grand grandfather was the only one in his family to have a middle school education. That's a... That was a big thing for him is like... He always brags, "I was the best in school in my family, so they sent me to middle school." Although a sad thing is, he... The only time I've seen my grandfather cry is we went on a trip together, just like the two of us to an island. We were just camping. And he would... I'm one of the only people in the family that listens to his stories, because I'm the only one who kind of hasn't heard them. And he was like... we were just walking and he was telling the story of going to middle school, and he would tell me that his family couldn't pay the school fees, because it wasn't full free schooling at the time. He couldn't pay the school fees so every day for like, an hour in the morning, him and all the kids who I couldn't pay the school fees would have to go to the back

of the class on their knees and put their hands up, as a punishment, which is pretty typical punishment that era in Korea. I think that kind of stuff lasted, really, until the late 90s, as far as my parents say, and he would just do that, but he always thought he would graduate middle school, but because he basically was almost never able to pay his school fees, they didn't let him graduate. And that's... I think that's really stuck with him to this day, because he remembers his his schoolmates during middle school graduation. They got flowers from their parents, and they would... Their parents would buy them expensive snacks that they could never buy. And he said he was like, outside of the school courtyard where the graduation was happening, looking in with some of his other friends. That was, that's the... Him telling that story is the only time I've ever seen him cry, like he teared up, and then he like, stopped, we sat and he had a smoke. It's a fond memory of mine is him telling me all those stories. And yeah, after that, he just kind of farmed with his family for a while, until he was 16. When he was 16, he moved away on his own. It was the winter too, so he had a few bills in his his pocket. He... There was a bus route from his hometown to Incheon. He was trying to work... Get work in Incheon.

Henry Landay 42:34

And just to... Sorry to interject. Just to like... Can you just orient me on the timing of this? Was this... Was that middle school story immediately post war? Was it...

Geunghyul Park 42:47

So middle of... My grandfather was born 1954.

Henry Landay 42:52

Okay.

Geunghyul Park 42:53

So that was post war, but very much reconstruction time.

Henry Landay 42:58

Yeah, reconstruction, okay. So he hopped on the bus.

Geunghyul Park 43:03

Hopped on the bus. He actually took a big walk to get to the bus station. It was his big story. He was like, "Oh, I walked up like a hill in the snow," because there was a direct route from his hometown to Incheon, but he would run out of money if he bought that bus ticket. So he went to another one where it was a little bit cheaper, and he took that bus to Incheon. He said he arrived around, like, 2pm, 2am and then he had 10 *won* (원 Korean currency) left. *Won* is like the Korean money, but it was much less inflated at the time. So 10 *won* was like... In today's money, it's like 1000 *won*, which is like 80 cents, and he could buy one bowl of *Sujebi* (수제

Hand-torn noodle soup). *Sujebi* is known as a traditional workers food. No one really has *Sujebi* anymore. But basically what it is is little rice cakes. But it's not like well formed rice cakes. It's just like, literally mashed rice in some broth, like vegetable broth. And he had a bowl of that, and then he was out of money. So he was like, "Okay, what do I do now?" So he like, slept the first night... First few nights under a bridge, until he had found a job. He was 16 at the time, which was very impactful to me. He worked construction for a while, and he tried to lie his way into getting a higher position. Because, when he was working, his boss one day, he said... he gathered all the younger guys, he questioned them, "Okay, who here has graduated high school?" Like a few... like three guys put their hands up and he lied. He was like, "Yeah, I graduated high school." But, because they were trying to pick people to go to Japan to learn more advanced stuff. They were trying to build the first... First train lines... First subway lines at the time, and they had to learn all the technology from Japan. So they were, gonna send some people over. But they're like, "Okay, you guys who have graduated high school. We're gonna, like, send you guys over to Japan, like, learn all the technology. Just, like, give just get us a copy of your graduation certificates, and you'll be set." And then my Grandpa panicked because of that... And he got... He ended up getting fired from his job because of that. But he did end up finding another one immediately. He would like tell me those stories. So he just did construction basically his whole adult working life. What's something that's also very common at the time for construction workers in Korea was working in Saudi Arabia for a little bit, because a year's wage for a foreign... for Korean worker in Saudi Arabia was around eight to 10 years wage in Korea. So he worked in Saudi Arabia... Or in... Yeah, in Saudi Arabia for a year... Actually, not Saudi Arabia, Kuwait. He worked in Kuwait. This was the 70s. I have actually one picture that I want to show you of this because I think it's really cool. This is a picture of my grandpa in Saudi Arabia in the 70s. I don't know the exact year, but I know that it was probably mid 70s. December 2023 is when I moved to Korea. Went through his office and I found... Here's one picture of him inside in Kuwait,

Henry Landay 46:48

Woah.

Geunghyul Park 46:49

...in the 70s. One of my favorite pictures of all time, of my grandpa.

Henry Landay 46:56

That's amazing. That's amazing.

Geunghyul Park 47:00

This is just.. He just worked construction in Kuwait for a while, and by the time, he was, a lot more experienced, and he was leading his team in doing various stuff. Afterwards, he became a union leader. He just did that for a while. With the money that he earned in Kuwait, my

grandma opened up a store, like a convenience store in Hagik-dong, which is like where my mom grew up. And she still has that store now, although they've transitioned a few times. It was a convenience store for a few years, and then during the '88 Olympics in Korea, they sold pool floats for one year, and then, with all the money they earned on pool floats, they did a jewelry store, and that's what they still have now, a jewelry store. And after that time, my grandparents transitioned into like my my grandma earning most of like the income. And my grandpa, he was a... So Korea has these traditional markets, and my grandma, store is in one of those traditional markets. And, he was like, the market supervisor. He got elected by all the people who have stalls in those... In that market to I guess lead them. The position is called gwajang in Korean. I don't know what that would be in English, more like manager, market manager. He did that for a while. What's unfortunate is, when he was the *Hoejang* (회장 chairman), the market burned down. So the story my mom tells me is, they were in Paju so like, my grandparents hometown, and they get like a call at like, 1pm. This was like afternoon. My grandpa picks up and then he's like, "Okay, the market's on fire. We have to go." So they get in the car and it's... It's quite a significant drive, even now with like, modern better roads. Like a three hour drive, more like two hours. But he had the 80s car, and he's absolutely careening down the road, and they get there and like, the whole markets burnt down, basically, except for one row of stores. My grandma's store is still there. But, you can really tell that the effects of the fire, just like, entirely killed the vibe of the market. All the stores are kind of shut down. It's a little dilapidated looking, except for that one row that didn't burn down. After that, my grandpa kind of transitioned into more, like, governmental politics. He was very successful with that for a while, to where he became the *Minjudang* (민주당 Democratic Party). So. Like the, it's like a Korean political party or no, it's either *Minjudang* (민주당 Democratic Party) or *Gonghwadang* (공화당 Republican Party), but he was the congressional nominee for that for the party. And this was a time of military dictatorship, I'm pretty sure, or right after that, when those forces still had most of the power in the country. So he was their nominee for that district, and he was going to get elected to Congress, because that district was very heavily leaning towards that party. But unfortunately, what happened is Chun Doo-hwan, military dictator. I don't know if you're familiar with that name.

Geunghyul Park 50:51

Chun Doo-hwan. He... His son in law, who was studying at Georgetown Law, had graduated and wanted to go into politics, and because my grandpa was kind of like in a district near where he lived, where Chun Doo-hwan's son in law lived, they put Chun Doo-hwan's son in law in his congressional seat two months before the election. So, he ended up not getting elected. Somewhere within this time... Time frame, my grandpa also did trading... Like foreign trade. Foreign trade was very limited in South Korea for a long time. There were very few ways in order to get imported goods into South Korea. And my grandpa was one of the only people who was importing, like, Chinese goods into South Korea. He got, he got scammed by one of

his business partners, and lost all his money. It's like... He said... My grandpa is a very persistent man.

Henry Landay 50:51

I'm not.

Henry Landay 50:52

I can tell.

Geunghyul Park 50:52

Like, almost irritatingly persistent, but he's very impressive as a person. Like, I think, obviously, like, he's the person I can talk the most about, just because he's done so many things. That's, that's most of it.

Henry Landay 51:39

Did his like... Obviously, it's hard to say as you're going through, but did his troubles early in life, of like, having to move at 16 and just go to a new city, did that resonate with you at all? Or, like, did that put anything in perspective?

Geunghyul Park 52:38

Actually, that... I've never made that connection before. That's not really something that was on the top of my mind, because my grandpa, when I moved to Korea, he had a... He's in the first developing stages of Alzheimer's still. So, he's changed a lot in his temperament. So I guess, if he was the person he had been, I guess he might have, like, talked to me about it, or I could have related to it more. But, it was very different situation, I think. Because, there's a lot of solidarity in that generation, because there are a lot of stories like this, because it's such a time of tumult, and, like, everything was thrown in the air. So...

Henry Landay 53:24

Yeah.

Geunghyul Park 53:25

There's a lot of people that my grandpa knows who had very similar lives like that. Yeah. I mean, yeah. I guess it does mirror roughly, yeah.

Henry Landay 53:40

Yeah that was, it was such like a universally like hard time for South Koreans. Do you have any... Are there any other stories from your grandpa that resonate or even just come to mind?

Geunghyul Park 54:00

Um, one thing is, like, I was the first one, like, first baby in my generation to be born in my family. So, my Grandpa loves me a lot. Even, like, compared to my siblings. Like he... My mom would always say that your grandpa was... Has way too much favoritism towards you. She would like, scold my grandpa about that. But we had... We have a very special connection I think. Any stories... When he basically told me all these stories during this one trip to a remote island that we two went on, and that's a really big memory for me is just going on that trip with him... Actually, that reminds me of one more story. Korea has this tower called Namsan Tower. And Namsan is a really big mountain in the middle of Seoul, right in the middle. And there's one huge like observation post that goes up that was built in the 70s... and... 70s or 80s, I'm not very sure about. But at that time... Can you, can you look that up actually?

Henry Landay 55:26

I got it up right now.

Geunghyul Park 55:29

Namsan tower. When was it built?

Henry Landay 55:37

1980.

Geunghyul Park 55:38

1980, yeah. So at the time, he was still working construction, because he... he was still... My mom was born in 1980 and after my mom was born, he went to Kuwait. So this was like peak of his skill as a construction worker. Because he got hired to do welding on Namsan tower. At the time, like it wasn't very developed, like the safety standards. So him and all the welders would tie, like a rope around their waist and like, just go up there welding,

Henry Landay 56:13

Like some of those photos you see of people building the Empire State Building.

Geunghyul Park 56:19

And we visited Namsan Tower together, and he was like, telling me this story. He was like, "Oh, I built this actually." "Wow, that's so cool, grandpa."

Henry Landay 56:29

That is cool, awesome. That's all I had for you. If Is there anything else you wanted to expand upon. I know you like, went in depth a lot, but feel free to take any of this time to say anything else.

Geunghyul Park 56:51

Just other stuff I don't know how to really... Let's see grandpa. Oh, my maternal grandmother's mother, so my great grandmother is still alive. She turned 100 this last month. She's a hundred. Last ever generation in our family. I wish I had been able to talk to her more before she kind of got tired of talking to people. But yeah. She's a real trooper.

Henry Landay 57:27

I guess one last lingering question I have is, did you... Were there any stories that you heard of, kind of like, that pre Reconstruction Era of either like the Korean War, or maybe even World War Two, depending on if you're maternal grandmother...

Geunghyul Park 57:50

Yeah. There are a few. My great grandmother, she would tell me, she told me once that during the Korean War, that was when my grandma was, like, two years old, is when the war started. And like, my great grandma had her on her back as they went to Busan to kind of run away from the North Korean forces coming down. That's one thing... My grandma, of course, doesn't really remember it because she was so young, but she would tell me, like stuff she remembers from right after the war. Like she is actually really impressively good at English, my grandmother, even though she only graduated Middle School. Like she never went to high school. She's retained a lot of lot of English, so she can hold introductory conversations. She can do all the greetings and knows random words that I did not expect you to know at all. One thing she always tells me about is — she loves telling this story — is, when she lived in... when her family went back to Paju after the Korean War ended... were kind of stabilized. There were a lot of American military bases around there because it's so close to the border. And there used to be a highway that went from Paju to Kaesong, which is the southern most North Korean city. Those two are very historic cities in South... in Korean history. But, around the military base, whenever, like jeeps and like supply trucks would go through, or soldiers were walking through, my grandma and her friends would always go up to them and scream, "give me chocolate. Give me chocolate." That was like a phrase that she had, one of the first phrases she learned in English, because the American soldiers were like, had a surplus of chocolate, they would give it, give it to the little kids.

Henry Landay 59:47

Wow. What a memory.

Geunghyul Park 59:54

Yeah. it's... She really likes that one. She like, keeps repeating it.

Henry Landay 1:00:03

Would you like speak English with her as like... At all?

Geunghyul Park 1:00:09

Not really. Her generation of Koreans have this, you know, the English saying is, gibberish. Like, "Oh, that's gibberish." But Koreans, they call... Her generation of Koreans, they call foreign languages that they can't understand, "Syalla syalla" (살라살라 Gibberish). Whenever she would see my journal out. She was like, "Oh, this is Syalla syalla" (살라살라 Gibberish). Like, "What are you writing in here?" Like, "I can't read this." She's not very confident in her English skills, but she'll just like, say random stuff in English. I'm like, "How do you know that?" She's just like I'm smart. She'll just like, brag. But, that's kind of it. Um, I know the most about my grandpa because he's the most talkative about it, or was the most talkative about it. There's a really big gap with my paternal grandparents because I didn't really grow up near them, or... don't have as good of a relationship with them. So, yeah, I think I'm really grateful to have had such like a interesting person as my grandfather I think.

Henry Landay 1:01:25

Yeah, he sounds like an amazing man. Great. Thank you for taking the time to do this. And yeah, awesome.

Geunghyul Park 1:01:35

Of course, yeah. I had a great time, I have to say. I love talking about this.