

Dima Galanin 0:00

So just to start the project, I'm supposed to say my name is Dima Galanin. Today is October 7, 2025 and I'm interviewing through Zoom 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, given the stipulations that we agreed upon?

Narrator 0:48

Yes.

Dima Galanin 0:49

Okay, great. So, we'll just start with a few warmup questions. Could you please provide an overview of when and where you were born?

Narrator 1:00

I was born in Korea in the late-'70s, and when I was a young child, I moved to the UK, and my childhood was a mix of growing up in the UK and in Seoul, but ultimately I ended up moving back to London in my teenage years.

Dima Galanin 1:24

Great, great, excited to get more into those transitions. What was your familial structure and what were the professional roles of your parents when you were growing up?

Narrator 1:36

I had two younger siblings, and my father was working in finance, and my mother was a housewife.

Dima Galanin 1:48

Great, great. And so you were the oldest sister?

Narrator 1:51

Yes.

Dima Galanin 1:52

Great, great. I'm a middle child, so can't relate to that too much. Anyways, I'd love to just hear more about family experiences when you were younger. Do you have any memories of either excitement or apprehension regarding the repatriation of your family from London to Korea or vice versa, from Korea to London for the second time?

Narrator 2:13

So when we were moving from Korea to London the first time, I was very young, so the only thing I remember is being very excited to be on a plane. Honestly, that was the main event. And then moving back to Korea was actually far more traumatic, because by that point, I didn't really have a good memory of what it was like to live in Korea. And so I would say I knew intellectually that I was going back to supposedly, my hometown, but it didn't feel that way. And I know my

parents were very excited about it, but they tried to communicate their excitement to me, but I didn't share that necessarily. I was worried about it, and I know my sister was also worried about it, and the two of us were a little concerned.

Dima Galanin 3:24

Do you remember what you were most concerned about at all?

Narrator 3:30

No, because we really didn't have a good frame of reference. The issue was we really had forgotten a lot, so it wasn't really even anything specific. We just didn't realize how much of a difference it would be in our day to day lives. Once we arrived it became very apparent that everything was different, and I don't think we were prepared very well for that. Honestly, I think my parents had completely, completely overestimated our language abilities. We could not speak much Korean at all. And in my case, because I was supposed to be transitioning to a slightly higher level of elementary school, that was actually a problem because I could not read as fluently as I should for the grade. I obviously couldn't talk very well, so it was a problem. And I think my parents really just thought it would be okay. It was not okay for a while.

Dima Galanin 4:38

That makes a lot of sense. You mentioned that it very quickly became apparent that you were in a much different place. What memories do you have of those differences and what do you remember about how different it was? Could you elaborate a little bit more on that?

Narrator 4:57

So the thing that really bothered my sister and I the most, because we're the closest in age (the youngest one was so young, she was a baby). But the thing that really upset us was the milk. It tasted wrong, it smelled wrong. It was supposed to be milk, and it didn't taste anything like milk. We were really upset about that. We hated pretty much all the food. I think my mom was actually stunned at how we hated everything. I think she didn't realize how different it was going to be for us, because in her mind, well, we ate some Korean food at home when we were in the UK, it should have been okay. It was not okay. Nothing was okay. We hated everything, and we, the older two, we somehow struggled along, but the youngest one went on a food strike. She just declared she could not eat anything, and she just stopped eating. And that's a problem, because she was a baby, and I remember my mom being just completely like, I don't even know what to do anymore. So, we struggled. It was a really big change.

Dima Galanin 6:12

Wow. Yeah, it sounds like it. And food is something that is so accustomed in your daily routine and preferences, that it's so hard to get away from that. I can imagine how difficult that would be. Did you ever get used to the food?

Narrator 6:29

Eventually, once I actually managed to make some friends, and once I actually acquired better language skills, then it became a non-stop after school snacking bonanza. It drove my mother

crazy, because I wouldn't come home and she'd be like, "What are you doing?" And I was like, "Oh, well, there was this other thing that I found that I could eat on the street." It would drive my mom nuts.

Dima Galanin 6:57

So it was a lot of street food or what kind of stuff?

Narrator 7:02

It's kind of funny, because I had actually forgotten all about this until *Squid Game* came up. And my husband was like, "What's that thing they're doing on the street with the toffee? Like it looks like toffee." And I was like, "Oh, no, no. That's burnt sugar with some sort of chemical substance in it. And yes, we used to make those with the patterns." We didn't call it that thing at the time. I think that's a made-up name that they have now called *dalgona* (candy made with melted sugar and baking soda), but we didn't call it that. We called it something else, *ppopgi* (literally, "popped out", refers to aforementioned candy), which means that you're plucking it out or taking it out, and that's what it is. It's a mold. It's a sugar mold. And I found this game addictive. It also helps that you're eating pure sugar, literally, it's burnt sugar, you know? So I found that a lot of fun. And then the other things I tried, which I didn't find fun, and I really don't recommend, is these steamed silkworms called *beondegi* (steamed or boiled silkworm pupae). They still sell them now, but they sell them out of cans. They don't sell them on the street, I think. Maybe they do, I don't know, but I haven't seen them on the street. And the first time, I was tricked into eating it by a friend. She was like, "Oh, it's a really good snack." I ate it. I was like, "This doesn't taste like anything I know." And she was like, "Oh, you should go home and ask your mom." So I asked my mom. And my mom was like, "You mean, you ate a silkworm?" And I was like, "Wait a minute. No one told me this was silkworm." It was things like that.

Dima Galanin 8:41

That sounds like a comedic but also a little bit painful cultural accommodation process.

Narrator 8:47

Yes, there was so many instances, so many.

Dima Galanin 8:53

I'm curious, you said your parents were really excited to move to Korea. Could you talk about maybe the opportunity that your father saw in either Korea or London, maybe where he saw more opportunity, and what memories you have of their attitudes about moving?

Narrator 9:11

I don't really know how they felt about moving to London the first time around, but I'm sure they were very excited because it was an opportunity - a really big step up for my father's job. I'm assuming that when they were coming back, they must have had high expectations. But the reality was actually - I don't know exactly what happened - but the reality was probably quite different, because I remember after the initial excitement of coming back to Korea wore off, I think it was a little different. And my guess is that's what triggered my father, after a few years,

to try to move companies and find another job and find another way to go back to London again. That's my guess. But I cannot say that for sure but that's my guess, because otherwise I wouldn't have had the opportunity to move back again when I was a teenager.

Dima Galanin 10:14

That makes a lot of sense. And could you remind me what time period this was when you were in Korea for the second time?

Narrator 10:22

Yes, so this is the early-'80s, all the way up until, like mid-'90s.

Dima Galanin 10:32

Got it. Got it. That makes a lot of sense. I'm curious - it sounds like the food was a great, joyous memory for you, growing up in Korea. Do you have any other kind of memories of great joy or just fond memories of that second longer time that you spent in Korea as a schoolgirl?

Narrator 10:51

Yes. I mean, it helped that I didn't have to study at all because I didn't know any of the language. I barely did my homework. I was probably the bottom of the entire school. I really couldn't handle schoolwork at all. I was just not equipped with the language skills. It took me a very long time to get to the level where I could actually be at the same grade level. But that was actually a perfect excuse for me to go out and do other things, so I played with children who were much younger than me, who were much more forgiving of the fact that I couldn't speak Korean very well. So, one of the things I do remember is that when I was still in elementary school, so I'm going to say like maybe fourth or fifth grade, you could still find huge storms of like dragonflies and butterflies just in the neighborhood where I lived, which is strange because it was central Seoul. But, I mean, it's strange now, because we're not used to that. But even then, I mean that was how it was. People still had ... there were so many insects around. It's kind of crazy. Like just talking about it now makes it sound like I'm just making up. You would find enough dragonflies that it was actually part of your summer homework to try to catch dragonflies and say how many you counted, and the theory was that you were supposed to let them go, obviously. But they sold these little kits ... you would have this weird dragonfly catching holder, and then you would have this gigantic net, and you would buy them from your local stationery shop, and you would try to go and buy them and catch as many dragonflies as possible, as part of your homework. Now the kids, who are much more smarter, they were like, you don't need to pay money for that. You can actually just trick the dragonflies into landing on your hands, and you can catch them. And I was too much of a scaredy cat, so I could never do it. But the younger kids got so good at this that they could just pretend one finger was like a branch, and then they would catch the dragonfly wings with their fingers like that. And they would help their friends. They would help each other to get, like a crazy number of dragonflies. And then at the end of the day, their moms would be like, "You need to get rid of them now." So you have to let them all go. That's an interesting memory. I don't think anybody here ... this actually probably ages me a lot. A generation ago, that's how it was.

Dima Galanin 13:29

That's great. That's great. So I wanted to go back to something that you said earlier, which is when your parents moved back to Korea with you guys for that first time, it was a lot different than what they may have expected. Do you think you'd be able to elaborate on that at all? I'm very curious.

Narrator 13:48

I don't really know how much of this was related to ... Well, it's really weird because I was a child. It's only when I was older that I learned about the things that happened when I was a child, because language barrier and also, presumably, the language barrier, made it such that if I read the newspapers, I wouldn't have made any sense of it. But some of the things that definitely happened in the first few years of arriving was there were definitely demonstrations going on – a lot of them – and we were living in an area that's south of the river, so technically there were no demonstrations happening near us. But what would sometimes happen is during the day and sometimes even at night, you would actually get a whiff in the wind of something that smelled really acrid and really horrible. And the kids around me would be like, "Oh, that's *choerutan* (tear gas)." And I was like, I don't know what that is. So I came home and I asked my parents, I was like, "What is *choerutan*?" And they were like, "Oh, that's tear gas." And I was like, "Why are we talking about tear gas? What's tear gas?" And they were like, "Oh, it's because there's demonstrations going on on the other side of the river." And I was like, "Oh, demonstrations." And I just left it at that. I was like, okay. But that would happen. And during the first few years when we were there, there was a curfew. Around 5:30, 5 o'clock, there would be sirens, and it would go all across the apartment complex because they had these loudspeakers – like they actually built it outside of all the apartment blocks – and the loudspeakers would just go echoing these crazy, loud sirens, and basically you had to go indoors if you heard that. And I thought it was normal.

Dima Galanin 15:57

Yeah, that's amazing. It's amazing, you don't really realize the context of what's going on until maybe you get a little bit older.

Narrator 16:06

Yeah.

Dima Galanin 16:07

I can think of lots of examples like that in my own life. The curfew is really interesting. Do you ever remember breaking the curfew?

Narrator 16:16

No, no, no. The one time I think ... I heard ... so it would hear the local ... Oh, actually, I have to explain this. So actually ...

Dima Galanin 16:37

That's all good.

Narrator 16:38
Sorry, I just realized ...

Dima Galanin 16:39
No, no, no.

Narrator 16:40
I'm just making assumptions that you would know, but there's no reason for you to know. Back in the day, there would be people whose specialty was to go out at night to sell rice cake. So I know this sounds crazy, but it's like literally they make you the red bean filled rice cake. And they would go outside at night and they would say *chapssal-tteok* (glutinous rice cake). They would actually go around selling those things. And I remember hearing it a couple of times, and once I asked my mom, "Can we just buy it because I wanted to try it out." And my mom was like, "If I say no, she will never stop thinking about it." So she agreed to buy it one time, and that was the few instances where we were out of the curfew, and we went and bought this. We stopped the gentleman and bought it. But that's the only few number of times. Yeah.

Dima Galanin 16:40
And how was the rice cake?

Narrator 17:17
Oh, I was just really excited to have rice cake in the middle of the night. It just didn't make any sense. I was like, oh, well let's do it. It was like a special treat. Yeah.

Dima Galanin 17:59
I can imagine that. That sounds like a treat. I'd love to hear more about you or your family's experience with kind of the development political, both political and economic development, of Korea. I'm curious, do you remember what Korean democracy meant to your family? And how would you define what Korean democracy means to you?

Narrator 18:20
That's a really interesting question. I would say it didn't mean anything to me when I was a kid, even though when I first arrived there and for a few years, at least, in all of my classrooms, there was a presidential portrait that was stuck on the top of the big blackboard in front of the classroom in each class. I thought nothing of it. And then after or maybe around the time of the Olympics, then that stopped for whatever weird reason. From my point of view I didn't know why that stopped. And I do remember a lot of the times, even at that young age in elementary school, the kids were constantly talking about which Kim ... the three Kims.¹ And I was like, "Who are the three Kims?" I was like, "Why are we talking about the three Kims? This is so

¹ The "three Kims" were three Korean politicians from the 1970s and 1980s: Kim Young Sam, Kim Dae Jung, and Kim Jong Pil. The three of them all played dominant political roles during the South Korean transition from authoritarian military rule to civilian democracy.

weird." But even in that very young age, the kids were so acutely aware of something momentous happening and honestly, it didn't strike me as anything. And then I really lacked the awareness when I was a child. But I think once I got older, it really took until I got into high school that I started realizing some of the things that I had witnessed was actually because Korea had struggled so hard to find its democratic roots. And it was only then that I realized, actually, wow, I was really extremely lucky that the Koreans were so hell bent on finding a path out of their dictatorship. And I think a lot of it was triggered by the fact that there finally came a point in time when President Chun Doo-hwan, the former president, was sent on to trial.² And then I finally found out about what happened in Gwangju. All of these things happened when I became a very young teenager, and then it only started making sense then. And if I talk to my parents about it, because I definitely did, because I was like, "Whoa, wait. We showed up in the middle of crazy." And my parents actually very truthfully said that a lot of the times they were unaware because of the censorship. The level of censorship was such that really it was very hard to find out what was going on. And I know a lot of times people are like, "How could you not know?" But the the level of censorship was pretty severe. It was really, really harsh. So you had to really make a concerted effort to make this your mission to find out. And the average ordinary person – it was just not possible for them to really know. You'd hear rumors about it. But to a certain extent, you're like ... Well, how bad is it – when you're talking about the rumors of how the young men would get taken away by Chun Doo-hwan's people ... that is in a popular culture context. And I remember reading these magazines that were like, oh, there are kidnappings going on in the country. You have to be careful. You have to know your surroundings. And if you mesh that in, then it becomes really hard to know what's real. So I think it was very tough for the average person to ... you know that there's something wrong, but the level of wrong, it's kind of hard to really predict. You just know you have to mind your Q's and P's, but you don't know exactly why. So I would say I give Koreans a lot of credit for digging themselves out of that, and especially now, when we've had a recent situation where a sitting president tried to invoke martial law and managed to be completely thwarted by just the sheer willpower of the average person, I would say that's a triumph. But I think that really shows how much Korea has grown. In the past it was always the thing to do – if you're a conservative or if you're an older person – be like, "Oh, Korea. Oh, when will we ever become like a developed country?" Oh, you know. And there's a lot of hand wringing. And I would say now – I think in the 21st century – Korea finally has managed to achieve what a lot of countries get, and sometimes fail to hold on to, which is a real democracy. I mean yes we will have a president, a former president, who will most likely join the whole string of former presidents in jail. But hey, we're consistent! So I'm very proud of it. I really am very impressed. I witnessed the whole thing on TV at home in my pajamas in New York City, and I am very, very proud of it. Really.

Dima Galanin 23:43

Yeah, that makes a lot of sense, and I can imagine how you'd be so proud of it. Yeah, and that sense of patriotism that you feel. So obviously, political development is not the only transition that's kind of shaken South Korea's roots over the past forty, fifty years. I know that economic development is something that you've been keenly aware of as well. So I'm curious if there's a

² ROK president from 1980-1988.

site or experience that you can recall that really indicated the rapid economic development of South Korea to you, or maybe it's a set of experiences that you've noticed?

Narrator 24:24

I am not necessarily sure that I saw enough of the very poor Korea to really feel like there was such a dramatic difference. When we were talking about it at home, we were always talking about in the context of norms and values, and what we mean by that is public civility and public manners. And the thing that we will always talk about would be, well, in the UK, people have this queuing culture, and they have this concept of ... at least you have some idea that there's certain behaviors you should do in public and certain norms. And when I was growing up, my parents would always be like "Koreans need to have these norms. They need to have better understanding of norms." And I would say, that is probably tied to economic development, but also I think it's tied to a lot of other things, like better education, and also more commitment than before to a sense of public identity. And I think that that has changed tremendously since when I was a child. I distinctly remember there was one day when my parents took us to this theme park, and it was a very long day, everybody was extremely tired, and there was only one bus that took us to the subway station. When they arrived, there was so much jostling, and the line that we had been standing in just disappeared. It just became a crowd trying to get on the bus. And we all came home shaken by that, because we were like, "Wow. Well, so much for that." And I remember my parents and I going, "Well, I don't know, would that have happened if we had been in London?" We were all just debating it, because that was such an awful experience. And when you go to Korea now, there's not even a question ... I think a lot of people are like, well no, there are so many norms that we follow in public places. You stand in line, you wait your turn. Yes, there may be a couple of people who just don't do that, but generally speaking, everybody follows these norms. I think there's a big cultural shift that's really changed dramatically. In terms of economics, every time I go to Korea, there's a new building, and I think the one thing that has definitely shifted is ... I really don't recall the level of consumption that I see now. I think that there's so much conspicuous consumption in Korea that I find very puzzling and kind of concerning. Where I see that there's a huge, huge demand for very high end, expensive luxury goods. And I just find it really bizarre and odd, this fixation with that external need for the external validation that you get from getting a high-end designer product. And I think that's weird. I find that very strange and very pervasive. It doesn't matter where you are. It seems like I could be traveling to Busan, and I would see somebody carrying – hopefully a real – Chanel bag. But it's just the level of awareness about it and hype about it. I find that really fascinating.

Dima Galanin 28:27

Yeah, that is really interesting. I'm curious. When did you start to notice that, and was it just something in public? Is it something you noticed in the Korean media? I'm really curious about that conspicuous consumption that you're talking about.

Narrator 28:41

So I think on a personal level, it affected me because I had a childhood friend who ... we had grown up in the same neighborhood, so I assume very similar family background, but once she

became a university student, she really wanted those kind of bags. And she wanted something that was very expensive, and she wanted to be able to show it off, and so she told me that she had ... her mom had developed this credit card plan so that they could get this thing, and I just didn't understand it at all. Because at that point in time, I had already moved back to London, and I was really focused on finding my next job and trying to earn a little bit of income on the sides by working as a typist. And I was just like, "I don't really understand why, why we're having this conversation. You're a college student. I don't really see why you need this bag. And it's like, literally, like, \$2,000, so why do you have to come up with this credit card payment plan to get this bag?" As I got older, I definitely saw more of it amongst people who I met, and I think that's definitely still a thing.

Dima Galanin 30:13

Yeah, yeah, no. The pervasiveness of luxury goods is really interesting. And how that grows along with economic development in countries, definitely, definitely, very interesting, and I know something that a lot of people find concerning. I'm curious ... you mentioned about your trips to Korea. So obviously, now you live in New York. How does the distance between you and Korea, how has that impacted your feelings for Korea and your relationship to it and and what memories - Would you say you conceive of Korea differently now that you live in New York?

Narrator 30:47

Hm ... that was a lot of questions.

Dima Galanin 30:55

I'm sorry. I'll try to make it into one. So I'd say, how would you say your conception of Korea has shifted since now that you live so far away from it?

Narrator 31:04

Right.

Dima Galanin 31:06

Apologies.

Narrator 31:08

I'd say in my case, the absence has made the heart grow fonder. Some of the things that grated me about being in Korea have gone down over the years. So for example, the rampant sexism that I encountered as a younger person, I always found it troubling and disturbing. I definitely feel less of it now. Great thing aging. No but seriously I think that at least formally, people know that you can't do that kind of thing anymore. And certainly I don't experience it on a regular basis when I go to Korea. I think some of the other things that used to bother me still bother me. If I assume that the most conservative response is what's going to happen, that is usually true. I think that still bothers me generally speaking. Korea's conservative stance on many, many social things bothers me a lot. But overall I would say now that I'm much further away, the positive things get highlighted more. The fact that you still have this sense of very, what I talked about, the common public decency, or an understanding of what's considered acceptable

behavior – I think that's a very positive thing. It definitely makes it much more comfortable to be in when you are there. And when I say that, I mean things like littering or even just things that I think should be common sense. Like not talking loudly in public, things, things like that. I think it's good. I think when I was younger and I was a teenager, it was something that I wanted to rebel against, especially the conservatism, and the sexism, and the need for regulating public behavior. I found it very constricting so I was very negative about it. But now I've definitely mellowed out so I tend to see it more positively.

Dima Galanin 33:58

Yeah that makes a lot of sense, and I appreciate you sharing that. You mentioned how Korea's conservative social culture has irked you over the years. Do you have a memory that you could share about that?

Narrator 34:09

Yes, I mean the sexism really rankled me tremendously. When I was working there briefly as an intern, I think the thing that really, tremendously, tremendously upset me was there was another intern who said something that was extremely sexist, and I challenged him on it. And nobody in the office, nobody at all said anything about it. I was furious. And then their idea of trying to be nice to you, and I understand it's awkward, but sometimes it would come out in ways that really felt harassment-like. They would be saying things like, "Oh well it's so good to see a pretty young lady in the office." And I'd be like right, because you hired me because I'm pretty right. Things like that, it would, it would be really tough. And I was always conscious of the fact that somebody was around to be like hey, "You could dress a bit better. You could put on more makeup." I've actually had those words said to me, and it was really tough managing that. So I remember that.

Dima Galanin 35:28

Yeah, yeah. No that does sound really tough, and I appreciate you sharing that memory with me. I'm curious, how have you sought to kind of create a relationship between your daughter and Korea, and what do you think her relationship with Korea looks like?

Narrator 35:49

Very early on I decided that my daughter's relationship with Korea would be whatever she wants it to be, because she's ultimately American. And if I tried to make her Korean, I knew that that wasn't going to work, because she doesn't have any lived experience of being in Korea as I did. There's no way she's going to go to school there. It's just a really different beast. What I wanted her to feel was being proud of her heritage and knowing where her family comes from. I mean that's really the most that I expected. And I mean including language ability, I didn't think that it was right to force her to learn a language if I wasn't going to be a Nazi about it at home. Because I very rarely speak in Korean at home, and when I do it's usually for something that you do. As everybody has found out, I tend to swear in Korean. I really need to stop that. So my attitude has always been these are things that are Korean. If you want it, you can take it, and if you want to learn more, you can learn more. But, that's your thing to do. So with her, I didn't force her to go on trips to Korea until she got of an age that she wanted to learn more about it.

And also, we did enroll her in Korean school here, the Manhattan Korean school, which is a wonderful school. And, the purpose of enrolling her there was not that she would learn the language, because we knew that ... I mean, we failed miserably learning the language when we were sent to Saturday schools, my husband and I, both of us, my Korean school in London did not prepare me at all for anything in Korea, and my husband's Korean school in Queens didn't do much for him. So, the whole point was to be around a milieu of kids with a similar heritage. That was it, and she was upset about it. She was like, nobody else needs to go to school on Saturdays. And we said, "That's not true. Have you looked at the Jewish kids around you?" And we said, "Hey, the Polish kid in your class is going to school too." And she was like, "But it's really miserable." And we were like, "Yes, we agree. It's miserable." "I don't understand the teacher." "Yes, I know. I know that feeling." And she was like, "So why do I have to go to the school?" I was like, "You have to, you just have to just take it." So she went, and she was miserable the whole time. She went from kindergarten until sixth grade, and she was miserable the whole time. But as a result of that, she managed to see that being Korean doesn't mean somebody who looks like me, or looks like her dad, or looks like herself necessarily, because it was a school that had people of mixed backgrounds, from all sorts of backgrounds. And, it had people coming in from Brooklyn and all parts of Manhattan and Queens. And it was a good experience for her to be: "Okay, so Korean-ness comes in lots of different ways, and that's okay." And that was the whole point. So I think it worked out well. She's very optimistic about Korea, and she occasionally scares the crap out of me, like she did today, where she suddenly broke out into Korean in front of me. I was like, "What just happened?" But yeah. I think it's okay.

Dima Galanin 39:42

That's quite funny. And yeah, I'm sure in the end, she'll be glad that she was forced to go to Korean school every Saturday. So you said that you really want her to know her heritage and where she comes from. What does that look like? What does that mean to you? What knowledge do you really want to impart to her?

Narrator 40:05

One of the things that always troubled me when I read about ... there's this section of fiction that seems to be hell bent on talking about your first generation immigrant experience. And when I read those, there's always an element that I feel is really sorely missing, which is not even a discussion of your grandparents, or your other extended family. And I find that always very troubling. There aren't even that many instances I can think of right now where there isn't that gap. It's always the immediate family and the conflict of the immediate family members in dealing with their new life in America. And I generally don't really have a lot of understanding of that, and I find it very narrow. So when I'm talking to my daughter, I want to make sure that she understands who her grandparents are, what they used to do, what they did. Why they might have emigrated, why, in the case of my parents, why they went back. And also, this sense of history. My family on my father's side, for example, they come from an area in Korea called —, and so that gives me an out for me to talk to my daughter about how there are lots of different types of Kims and how they come from different family backgrounds. And just because somebody is a Kim, doesn't mean that you're from the same background. And it's a chance for me to explain to her, "Oh, and you know, there are other family, extended family, and, these are

their lives." And I get a chance to talk to her about that. And the same thing for my husband's family, to the extent that I can. I don't know everything, and my husband's Korean when he was growing up was definitely limited enough that he can't explain that much either. So I try to do that, and just generally, have a sense of where you are from. And I think that's important, because it's very odd thing to think that you're just this one strange thing that just popped out of nowhere, because that's not really true. And I think having some idea of how over the years and decades, your genes have come to accumulate in this thing called you – I think that's an interesting story, and I think you should know about that story because it's your story. So that's what I mean by heritage, really.

Dima Galanin 42:58

Yeah, yeah, no. I mean, I think that is really interesting. And I've also noticed that in reading first generation immigration stories, as my father's an immigrant as well, so I think I can connect to a lot of that. And that's really interesting. So you talked about your husband a little bit. What do you think are the biggest differences between his immigration experience or emigration experience, and yours? Anyways, I would love to hear about the differences.

Narrator 43:29

I think the really big difference is that both of my parents speak English. My parents definitely knew everything I was saying. If I said something weird – oh, believe me. Once my mom heard me use the F word, and she was like, "Oh, my God, you come right over here, and we are going to have a chat about why that is never going to come out of your mouth again." So I think the difference really is that in my family, anyway, language was not the barrier. If we fought, we fought over everything, but at least we could argue it out. I think that in the case of my husband's family, there was definitely a language barrier, because my in-laws expected the children to respond back to them in Korean. And their Korean was limited, so that limits the topics that they can talk about. Yeah, I think that's the main thing. The other thing – I'm gonna say there's a difference of how you live your life when you're a minority always, and how you're a majority always, and I do think that that seeps through sometimes. Like, I take it for granted that I will be in some parts of social activities, and my husband, it doesn't occur to him. And I find that very interesting. And I think it's because I've moved around so much that I first of all assume that if I don't put my hand up, or if I don't have that expectation, than nobody will give me a seat at the table, but also because I had an experience of living as somebody who should be part of mainstream culture. And I think that attitude difference really makes a difference to how you approach things in life, and it's a little hard to explain the difference. Sometimes you wonder: Is it a personality thing? Is it education? What is it really? But I see the difference.

Dima Galanin 45:56

Yeah, could you elaborate with a memory of that potentially?

Narrator 46:08

For example, I thought it would be make perfect sense for us to volunteer as part of the parent association once – started in the Manhattan Korean school, but my husband was like, "Why?" I

was like, "What do you mean, why? We should. We're in a position where we can." And he was like, "Really?" I was like, "Yes." That kind of thing.

Dima Galanin 46:40

That makes sense. I'm curious about your work there, or really anytime when you're trying to represent Korean culture, or maybe talk about it with your daughter or your husband – what kind of values and norms and expectations are most important to you to share with other people about Korean culture and Korean heritage?

Narrator 47:02

I mean, I don't know if I necessarily have a list of values ...

Dima Galanin 47:11

Or maybe just things you want to make sure that people understand?

Narrator 47:27

I think there are some things that I assume that people know, but maybe people don't ... that the vast majority of Koreans are really hard working people, and they work hard their whole lives, and it's kind of almost insane. It's such an achievement-based culture. And that starts very early on from being a student, and it carries on through getting married, having children, all of that. And it can be very brutal, I think. But the flip side of it is that you have people who are extraordinarily well educated and very, very diligent. I mean, I am definitely a lazy sod. And it's probably a good thing that my parents moved back to London, because I probably would not have lasted. But I think a lot of people really underestimate how much effort Koreans put into their work and their study, and I think it's because to the average person outside of Korea, it would just be insane, like they just don't get it. Like we had this conversation when my daughter was studying for the SAT and I said "You know, if we were in Korea, you would actually have a subscription to a study place: *dokseosil*" (literally, "reading room", study room). And she was like, "What's that?" I was like, "You know, when you say *dokseosil*, it sounds like a really nice place, because it's technically a reading room. It's not a nice place. You go there so that you can study in a crowded room with a bunch of other kids, and, they take away your phones, and you sit there, and they lock the door behind you so that you can't leave. You stay there from really early in the morning until really late at night, and you're only allowed out for meals." And she was like, "They don't do that." I was like, "Oh, they do." That's the sort of thing I'm talking about. It's completely crazy.

Dima Galanin 49:50

Were you forced to experience one of those?

Narrator 49:56

For the portion of time I was in high school, they had these study hours that they didn't call study hours ... they called, it's ridiculous, it's *jayul hakseup sigan* (nighttime self-study), it means voluntary study hours. Nothing about it was voluntary. You had your dinner at school, and then

you had to stay in your classroom until 9:30 every evening to study. Yeah, definitely a taste of that.

Dima Galanin 50:31

That sounds like a lot. Do you have any memories of your parents work attitudes and maybe how those seem Korean to you?

Narrator 50:41

Yeah, my dad worked very long hours. My dad always worked very long hours. He had to leave very early in the mornings, and he would be ... I mean seriously for a lot of his working life, he did not come home until it was very late. Yeah, he worked very, very long hours. His chief thing to do during the weekends was to sleep. And I think actually, that's like a meme, like in Korean culture: the dad sleeping the weekends away. And the kids are like, "Can we go and do something?" And the dad's like, "Please just let me sleep." Yeah, yeah.

Dima Galanin 51:24

Yeah. I'm curious ... how do you remember your your high school: the culture of it, and your experiences there?

Narrator 51:34

It was very harsh. It was very harsh. There was always something to memorize, and there were exams every month, and then there were exams every quarter, and the quarter exams were hard, and the midterm exams were hard, and the final exams are hard. There were so many subjects to study – I can't even remember how many ... maybe 13. Something crazy. And I was not a very good student. I was very lackadaisical. I didn't have the discipline that all the other kids seemed to have. Somehow, miraculously they figured out that it's okay to study until 9:30, and then go home and study more, and I was just not very good at that. So I think I was a very uneven student. There were months where I managed to keep up and months where I didn't. I remember my homeroom teacher drew a chart of my grades, and it was just waves. And he was like, "Wouldn't it be great if you could stay at the top parts of these waves?" And I was like, "Yeah, but, you know studying here is really boring." And he started laughing, and he was like, "If there's a way you could find, like, a way to keep that engagement that would be great." And I was like ... Yeah, it was hard. It was very hard.

Dima Galanin 53:11

Yeah, yeah, I can imagine ... that's also a pretty funny story. Wouldn't it be great if we could all be perfect all the time? I want to end the interview with something that you said to me in our call, which I thought was really interesting, which was the term ... you referred to the importance of the term cultural porousness. So for the sake of the interview, could you please define that concept and also explain why you think it's such an important thing for Korean culture to embrace?

Narrator 53:41

Oh, right. I guess in the context of this conversation, what I mean by culture porousness is to have some awareness of what is influencing the culture and what it's influenced by. There's always two sides – culture is always an exchange. But I think part of the thing that I see that is maybe not so well thought of, or considered, is the fact that Korean culture has changed and been shaped by multiple different sources. And I see that there's not always a good acknowledgement of it. So a good example would be the current craze of the *KPop Demon Hunters*, which, was made by Korean Americans – not Koreans. So I think that that's something that I want to point out – there needs to be a better awareness that having these not so clear cut boundaries is actually beneficial, and it will help Korean culture develop in ways that we can't imagine. And if you have a very rigid idea of what is a Korean culture ... What it should be is actually really not the way forward, especially when we're talking about a very aging population. When we're talking about a population like all societies, that is facing up to lots of different crises like the advent of AI, climate change ... all of these things. I think it means that in order to be more of a flexible and ... what's the right word ... a culture that's capable of evolution, you should really know that being porous means that you absorb other influences, acknowledge those influences, and you can then create something even better. And I think that's the one thing that I hope that Koreans as a whole can work on and not stick to this very rigid idea of what it means to be Korean and what it is to have something Korean. I think the other thing I would like to point out is that when people talk about that, the vast majority of people are talking about 19th century Joseon stuff anyway, which is only a slice in time of a very, very long history. So, I would say, I think we can dig a bit deeper. And really it's okay if it doesn't follow a 19th century idea. I would also point out – very fantastical usually – it's not even true to the historical format of what it would have been in the 19th century. I think it's much better if we look through the whole history, the 5000 years, as we always say, and really enjoy different aspects of it, and remember that Korea, as a country unified, is just a sliver in time of its 5000 year history.

Dima Galanin 57:03

Well that makes a lot of sense. That's really interesting. I read a piece on how people have defined Korean culture and how just the definition of itself can kind of be weaponized to one's own interests and opinions. So I definitely appreciate what you're saying. Well I think that that wraps up our interview. I can't thank you enough for for taking this time, and it was really, really interesting to hear about the experiences of you and your family and also your daughter and your husband. Can't thank you enough for all your help with this project. I really appreciate it.

Narrator 57:40

My pleasure. Thank you.