**My Korean Grandmother’s Memories of the Japanese Occupation and the Korean War**

Taken from Asiapundits

I haven’t spent that much time with my Korean grandmother, but I like her.  She is a sweet old lady, always trying to make me as comfortable as possible and preparing food for me.  She is remarkably similar to my departed grandmother back home, not just in character but also because they both lived through the Second World War.  I was too young to take the opportunity to ask about the war to my grandparents in England, all I really knew it that one of my grandfathers was in the navy and both grandmothers stayed in London and experienced the blitz, hiding in the London Underground system.  This time I had a good chance to ask about both the Second World War and the Korean War and wondered how old my Korean grandmother was when they happened and whether she remembered anything.  It turns out she could recall quite a lot and we sat talking about it together helped by some translation from my wife over one of her favourite meals, a take-away pizza.

During the occupation by the Japanese during the Second World War, she was an elementary school student and she lived on an island near Mokpo called Anjwado (안좌도).  Her family was extremely wealthy, had quite a large house and garden, could afford to have servants, and ate meat regularly, something the majority of Koreans could not do at the time.

The Japanese occupied Korea a long time before the Second World War (1910-1945) but one of the first memories that she can remember of the Japanese is bumping into a Japanese patrol officer in her own garden whilst on her way to the toilet (which was outside).  She described him as stern looking with a smart dark uniform and hat, carrying a long sword.  She said she was terrified and spoke in Japanese to him, explaining what she was doing.  The Japanese insisted on Koreans, and especially youngsters, speaking the Japanese language at all times.  The officer was pleased to hear her speak in his own language and so smiled and let her carry on.  She said it was common for patrol officers to walk the streets at night in this way.

Her other memories mostly revolved around her time in elementary school, which bizarrely, she said most of her time was spent digging holes for the Japanese.  Apparently, this was done towards the end of the war as the Japanese were starting to worry about being captured by the Americans.

The principal at her school was Japanese and speaking Korean was strictly forbidden.  She was one of the principal’s favourites as he knew her family and they were well educated and could speak Japanese well and he often invited her family to dinner in his office.  On one occasion they were not all available so she went on her own.  She recalled how she asked for more white rice because she was hungry and having all white rice was rare for Koreans at the time, even for the rich, it was a privilege mainly of the Japanese occupiers.

She would mention frequently how cruelly the Japanese treated Koreans back then; I suppose this is a common theme in war and colonization anywhere.  Atrocities that were well known to my Korean grandmother at the time were beatings and murders of Korean men, women, and children, the previously mentioned taking away of women and girls to Japan for sex or slave labour, and medical experiments that were run on Koreans as well as some other nationalities in Asia.  This, and the general aim to suppress and destroy much of Korean culture caused a festering hatred underneath the polite and respectful face the Korean people had to show for their Japanese superiors.  After the war ended, some Japanese stayed behind in Korea, either because they were unable to get away or because they had built a life for themselves there and wanted to try and blend in with the Korean population.  She said that some were able to go undetected but most were found out and were beaten or tortured to death by Korean people seething with anger over years of painful occupation and that this could be seen or heard about quite often in the months after independence.

Not long after Koreans breathed a sigh of relief after having rid themselves of their Japanese oppressors another war came around.  Now at middle school grandma Kim (her family name) was still a resident of her island of birth off the coast of Mokpo but her brother had been sent to study in a high school in Seoul.  When the war came to Seoul his only option was escape and he did so on foot.  He walked for over two weeks from Seoul to Mokpo and luckily came across one of the family’s servants who organized a boat for travel to Anjwado the next morning.  When he arrived he was disheveled, homeless looking and malnourished, but the family were surprised and delighted to see him because they had feared the worst when they had heard the news about Seoul.

During the first surge the North Koreans swept down the peninsula rapidly while the Americans, South Koreans, and other allies were getting their house in order.  The North Korean tactics of full frontal assault without too much care for losses in their own ranks as long as progress was made almost had them take-over all of the South (once they were stopped, however, these methods began to hurt them in the long term).  At one stage the Americans and South Koreans only held a small corner of the Korean peninsula in the South East and a stand was made along the Busan perimeter.  As it turned out her family were incredibly lucky to survive this time.  The island next to hers, was apprehended by the communists.  Some residents and the servants of richer families switched sides and gave up or killed those that stood on the other or were too late in defecting.  My Korean grandmother told of how they would drown the children and babies in pots of water.  It was shear luck that this wasn’t my grandmother in-laws fate, one of the two islands fell into communist hands, hers did not.  The tide then started to turn in the war and the communists began to be pushed back, they never made it to her island.  She was somewhat isolated from the worst of the war after that and her family was able to maintain their wealth.

This gave me a brief glimpse into some of the pain the Korean people have experienced at the hands of the Japanese and in the Korean War.  The fact is though, that even before this Korea had a long history of invasion from other countries and fighting within their own.  For many years Koreans have called themselves the people of 한 많은 역사, this is roughly translated as the people having experienced many examples of unfairness, grief, suffering, and despair (한, Han) in their history.  This is undoubtedly true, and I think it does explain much of the defensiveness about their culture they exhibit sometimes and certainly their strong dislike of the Japanese.

The concept of 한 (Han) does seem to run deep in the Korean mindset.  It may be a part of what it is to be Korean but, in my opinion, it is not something that helps the people all that much.  Dwelling on the past is not often a useful exercise, learning from the past and building a better, more peaceful future is what is most important.  One wonders if 한 is a factor to this day in many disputes revolving around Korea and whether these feelings of unfairness and despair are still motivating much of what is going on in the North.  I was struck, however, that in my grandmother in-laws case, she did not appear to be too animated or filled with hate when she was telling us of her experiences.  It seemed as if she had moved forward with her life, not forgot what happened, and maybe forgave to some extent.  Then again, maybe it was easier for her as her family really came out relatively unscathed from both wars.  Perhaps it is not so easy on those people who lost loved ones or were victims of some of the vilest atrocities and suffering these wars undoubtedly meted out.  As with so many things, moving forward and forgiving offences against you is something much easier said than done.