

# Horrors of Korean War linger after 50 years

The Korean War has been over for 50 years, but my memory lingers with horrible flashbacks. I was an 8-year-old second grader in Seoul, at school when I first heard bombing above my head. My teacher told us all to go home.

I walked as fast as I could. My mother was waiting impatiently. My dad worked for the department of transportation. The bombing destroyed his office and injured his leg.

That night, my parents took me and my younger brother and sister to my grandparents' house in Incheon, a port city 50 miles southeast of Seoul. Although we were very young, we sensed the danger, so we behaved well not to add to our troubles.

The next day, the bombing started heavily like a severe thunderstorm with hail. We were in a basement for three days until the bombing stopped. The streets were flooded with people. We also fled. One hand held tightly onto my grandmother's skirt, the other to my brother's hand so I wouldn't get separated from them among the

thousands of people.

Suddenly North Korean bombers appeared. We all laid down on the ground. Countless cars, trucks and buildings were destroyed. Countless refugees were badly injured or killed. We hid in a shack for two days. My grandmother took us back to her house. But her home had been bombed like many others.

## Leaving town

A few days later, my grandfather came with news that the North Korean army was close. He took us to the harbor. There were a thousand refugees waiting to catch a boat. Finally we were able to get on a small boat that took us to a remote island. We waited until low tide then walked onto the murky seabed for a few miles. Our feet had cuts and bruises from shells and stone. Although my legs were hurting, I couldn't complain or cry. We had to be absolutely quiet not to be spotted by the North Korean army. We stayed with a relative on the island. There was not enough food so we fed ourselves with vegetables

## KOREAN WAR MEMORIES

and clams from the sea. About a month later my father came and decided to take us back to Seoul.

We walked about 19 miles before we were able to reach a boat from the other side of the island. That night we arrived at my grandmother's house (my mother's mother) in BuPeung. The next day we left for Seoul along with my 19-year-old aunt because young women were easily taken away by the North Korean army. We walked over 70 miles to get to Seoul. My feet got boils by walking a long time in the heat, making it unbearable.

We used an old rickety boat to cross the Han River. I saw the demolition of the Han bridge, the only bridge that connects to the southern part of the country. We reached our house very late at night. Houses around us were either burned or destroyed. There were no people. We had to be very careful not to let anyone know that we were still living in our house, hiding.

One day my parents sent us to one of their friend's house because our home wasn't safe. His house had an underground shelter. One October evening, there was bombing like a fireworks display; the sky was engulfed in flames. We stayed in the shelter all night long, horrified. The next day when bombing lessened, my aunt decided we should go back to my parents. She felt it would be better for us to die with them.

On the way, airplanes appeared directly over our heads and started shooting like hail. People dropped like flies, and I saw blood spurring all over the place. I saw my aunt on the ground. Her shoulder was bleeding like a river. I didn't know what to do. People had already fled or were dead on the street. I didn't know what to do. My little brother and sister were clinging to me with fear. The bombers were back over our heads pouring shells like black rain. I thought we were all going to die. I held my brother and sisters

bodies tightly and laid down next to my blood-soaked aunt. The earth was shaking horrendously; my heart pounded like a drum.

## A soldier's help

I don't know how long we laid next to my dead aunt. I heard a heavy rumbling sound coming toward us, shooting shells aimlessly. After the tanks were gone, there were trucks full of soldiers. The three of us were staring at them helplessly. One of the trucks stopped and a soldier walked toward us. He tried to figure out what was going on with us. Soon he held my brother over his shoulder and with his other hand held my sister and started to walk. He asked me to follow. He took us to a woman, gave us some canned food. He left us in her care.

Thinking back, he jeopardized his life to save us. There were so many communist soldiers who could've easily gunned him down. I still vividly remember him: about 18 years old, 5 feet 10 inches, somewhat pale. I hope he got back on his truck.

That night the woman took us to the underground shelter near her house. She asked me if the woman who had been killed was my mother. I told her she was my aunt and my parents were at home. Then I realized our bodies were covered in blood. Soon we fell asleep with a blanket around us. The next morning people left the shelter, and we were the only ones not knowing what to do next.

Suddenly I remembered that I'd left my aunt alone in the street. I left my brother and sister in the shelter and walked out to where my aunt lay. She was covered in a blanket and looked as though she were sleeping. I talked to her like she was alive because, until that moment, it never crossed my mind that she was dead.

## A familiar face

I don't know how many days we spent in the shelter, but one

day, out in the street, I noticed a friend of my father walk by. Of course he didn't recognize me. My face was covered in dried blood, I had lost weight, my hair was unkempt and full of dirt. Finally he recognized me. I took him to the shelter where my brother and sister waited.

He took us to his house and fed us. We changed into clean clothes and washed. The next day my father came. He immediately looked up to heaven and said, "Thank you, God, for returning my precious children safely."

The next day someone told us the bodies were taken to be buried near the mountainside. We found my aunt and cremated her that day.

My father took her ashes to my grandparents. We took a boat to an island where countless refugees had already settled. Red Cross Food Relief and also some government supplies fed us. The war continued. Things didn't get better. We lived two years in Pusan. I went to a mobile school set up for refugees. There were no desks or



Kangja Song-Han

chairs or paper.

After three years, we returned to Seoul. I often thought about the soldier who took us to the woman and saved our lives. If there is a chance to see him again, I'd thank him from the bottom of my heart.

Kangja Song-Han lives in Livonia and works in a community mental health center in Detroit.

## On exhibit



**Detail:** From *Iris Robota 2001*, plywood and lacquer. This and other works by Farmington Hills artist Ted Hadfield are at the Lemberg Gallery, 23241 Woodward, Ferndale, through May 26. For more information, call the gallery at 591-6623.

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