A Survivor's Testimony: Closing Remarks to the Conference on Implementing Truth and Reconciliation: Comparative Lessons for Korea

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A SURVIVOR’S TESTIMONY:  
CLOSING REMARKS TO THE CONFERENCE  
ON “IMPLEMENTING TRUTH AND  
RECONCILIATION: COMPARATIVE  
LESSONS FOR KOREA”  

Dr. Theresa Chun*  

I thank you for asking me to come. It is my great privilege to be here and to listen to the paper presentations. When the Korean War broke out on June 25, 1950 I was a first year medical student in Seoul Women’s Medical College. We lived right outside within a block of Changdeok Palace, in Seoul Korea. At the time my father was dying from cancer. He was fifty years old. When the UN army liberated Seoul on the 28th of September, 1950, I was in medical school carrying trays and cleaning up tables for the North Korean wounded soldiers because they used our hospital as theirs. I’m not going to go into detail because that will take too much time.

My father went to Kanghwa Island because he knew he was dying and he wanted to go to our hometown; so Father was not at home on the 28th of September. When I escaped Medical School I scaled the concrete wall and came down to the other side. Otherwise, I would have been taken to North Korea by forced march.

When I came home my mother told me a man from Donghwe—that’s a village office— took my younger brother, seventeen years of age, to Donghwe to ask him some questions. So, sometime in the evening—and I would date this between the 28th and 30th of September, I’m not so sure—I went to Donghwe, which is no more than a block from my house. By then it was dark and there were probably twenty or thirty men all milling around. It was dimly lit with a kerosene lamp or candle, I don’t remember which. I was the only woman who walked in and I saw my brother, Luke, who was just very slender and a small person. The man was standing beside my

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brother and he raised a fist when I went in. So I asked him, "Why did you take my brother here?" And the man said, "He is a spy for North Korea." And this was absolutely ridiculous because he wasn’t anything like that.

We moved recently to that area, and we had nobody who knew us well. So, I told the man why Luke cannot be a spy. And he just wouldn’t listen and he raised a fist saying "Tell the truth," and I saw my brother, the slender body shrinking down from fear. And no amount of my talking convinced these people. And meanwhile they were all smoking cigarettes in this dark room, and it was filled with hatred, the whole people, the milling people, it was dark with hatred. I couldn’t believe it. So finally I realized I just cannot say anything more, and I thought surely by next morning they will realize my brother had nothing to do with North Korean spies.

So, next morning Mother went to Donghwe. And they said he’s not there anymore, that he was taken to police station in Donhwamoon. So Mother went to Donhwamoon asking for my brother . . . to the police station. And the police said: "He’s not here. We don’t know where he is." And that was the end of it. No one knew where he was.

There were three months between this time and North Korea’s re-invasion with the Chinese Red Army. We left on January 3, 1951 with backpacks on. During all this time inquiries about Luke led to nowhere. But just a little while before we all left—not just us, but everybody left the city of Seoul—the Tongjang, Mr. Choi, who was the village representative whom I knew a little and Mother knows. He is a respected and trustworthy person. He came to Mother and said “Do not expect your son to return; he was taken to Miari,” which was a rural area at that time. It’s a hill, and Mr. Choi said he and some other people were shot and buried somewhere in Miari. By then we were in a hurry to leave Seoul as refugees. In retrospect, I feel he died within several days of the 28th of September. He was the gentlest person I have ever known.

For a long time later there was no communication or travel to Kanghwa Island. We realized my father died within a few days of my brother, Luke. Then we were refugees in Pusan. I continued, after missing one year, my medical studies, and I never went back—we never went back to Seoul to live in the same house. That’s the end of the story. Short, short version of it, but what I want to say is that yes, I heard this morning the discussion and I want to tell you what it is to be the family of the victim.

For me it defined my life. I was twenty-one at that time, naïve, and knew nothing about life. I was a very hopeful person, but it made me pessimistic about human life. From that time on until now I tried very hard to be optimistic, to look at the good side, which I had plenty of, obviously, but deep down I remained sad and pessimistic about human conditions. And the sadness is pushed down a thousand miles because it’s too painful to bring it
up. And I have two younger brothers: one is a physician, retired, and the other is a businessman in Southern California. My mother died in ’72, and all of us were never able to talk about it. We couldn’t tell about it.

One day when I was in Brooklyn in the early 1960s there were a lot of people walking and I saw a young slender man walking on the left side of the street, and he looked exactly like Luke. I crossed the street and was following him. Then I realized it’s impossible that Luke is in America—it’s impossible. How is that . . . he’s nowhere. He’s nowhere. I don’t know what happened. But there is a feeling if I walk, just walk, walk to the end of the earth I will find Luke. That feeling . . . I know I am not alone. There are a lot of Korean people in my shoes.

I tried to understand why did this happen. Why did those men take Luke? I don’t know who they are but that was the village office headquarters for Suhbook Chung nyun (North West Youth Association). And if I am correct I think they were refugees from the north who came down to the south and formed the North West Youth Association. So, they were the culprits, it’s my interpretation. From the way they looked that night, the dark hate filled faces . . . I try to make sense out of it. Why did this happen? My thinking is they had to put into action their hatred. And I think in extreme times, which it was because when North Korean soldiers went back north there were huge atrocities committed before they left. So everybody was, you know, in a mindset of revenge, violence, hatred. And my brother happened to be at home and they took him. At that time no one was on the street; I just never saw anybody walking around my house or even the university when I escaped at that time. I think they did it because they were burning with hatred.

So my own thinking is that probably every human being is capable of expressing or putting into action their hatred. Where does it come from? Truth and reconciliation and reparations is after it happened. So I was thinking continuously, how do we make it not happen in the first place?

It’s heartbreaking to see what is happening in Libya because we haven’t learned the lesson; and nobody could prevent, from what I read in the paper, what is happening now in Libya. I made the conscious effort and the plan in my late twenties: there is nothing I can do for my brother, but I want to do something so that other persons do not die like my brother and other families won’t be like our family and myself. So, I consciously made a plan and effort to leave a fund in Luke’s name. My salaries were modest because I worked in the State Health Department quite a while and here at [the University of Buffalo] and the Children’s Hospital. So what I am leaving I want other people to use because I am too old—I’m 82 years old—to do anything about it. So I am hoping that people will use the funds I leave behind in the Luke and Theresa Chun Memorial Fund for this purpose, so
that we don’t have to talk about truth and reconciliation and compensation. I know it’s a dream world, but we have to start somewhere. And if we can start now, even if we save one person from this kind of fate, I think my entire life’s hope and plan will be worthwhile. Thank you.