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BOOKS



DENNIS ODA / <mailto:doda@starbulletin.com>

Jackie Kim is the author of "Hidden Treasures," featuring the oral histories of Korean women and their WWII experiences in Japan.

Author's time in Japan unlocked Korean heritage

By Nadine Kam
<mailto:nkam@starbulletin.com>

Thinking about one road not taken, Jackie J. Kim tries to imagine what her life might be like today had she stayed in

Hawaii after graduating with a journalism degree in 1994. Chances are, as a broadcast beginner she would have been handed the brush-fire and car-accident beat, and might still be waiting for someone higher up on the ladder to quit or retire.

Instead, she traveled to Japan through the JET program, with the intention of helping Japanese students learn English, and returned with the seed of a book, "Hidden Treasures: Lives of First-Generation Korean Women in Japan," plus a broader view of her life as an American of Korean ancestry.

"Before I went I never felt self-conscious about my Korean-ness, but after six months I really searched for Korean things, I wanted Korean food. It gave me comfort. So I started wandering around the city, and when I saw the Han'gul, the Korean letters, over a yakiniku restaurant, I went in.

"But I was nervous. I didn't speak Japanese, so I didn't know how I would order. The woman there looked Korean, almost like my grandma, so I risked it and asked, 'Do you speak Korean?' and she said, 'Yes, what do you want to eat?'"

Kim asked about her life in Japan and was introduced to the complex and colorful world of the first generation of Korean women who migrated to Japan during Korea's colonial period of the early to mid-1900s.

"My eyes were opened to a different world, and it came to me more personally because I am Korean," said Kim.

After that, she started haunting Korean associations in search of others whose stories are similar to those of the many immigrants who arrived in Hawaii in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Unlike Hawaii's contract laborers, however, the Korean immigrants arrived in Japan, sometimes by force, only to be welcomed with intolerance.

"Koreans in America had a different experience because they were culturally free to be Korean. In Japan it was not fine to be Korean," Kim said.

To this day, different names separate the two groups. Koreans from the United States are called "Jae mi Gyopo"; Koreans from Japan are "Jae il Gyopo."

Fascinated by the women's stories, Kim extended her stay by signing up for a master's degree program at Tokyo's Sophia University, and in 1997 she started recording oral histories to preserve information originally gleaned from informal chats.

THE RELATIONSHIP between Japan and Korea has long been a strained one. The book's introduction by researcher Sonia Ryang capsulizes the history of the two nations, and the unresolved conflicts that resulted in repercussions lasting to this day.

Tomorrow marks the 60th anniversary of the end of World War II, but for the women profiled in the book, their problems did not end there, but were magnified.

With Japanese soldiers returning home, there was little need for the more than 1 million Koreans who had come to Japan after 1941 to keep factories running and help with the war effort. In 1952 those who remained were stripped of Japanese citizenship.

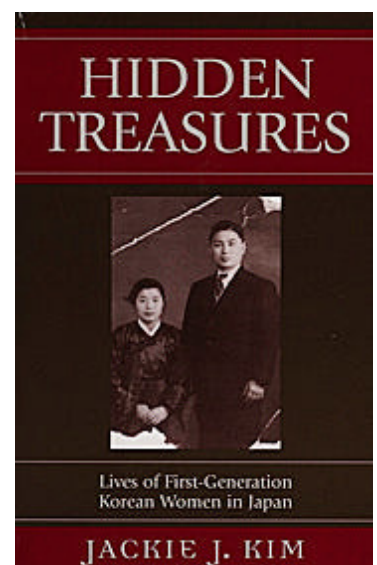
By 1965, Japan had established diplomatic relations with South Korea and guaranteed permanent resident status to Koreans opting for South Korean citizenship. But for many Koreans the choice was not an easy one. Although 98 percent of first-generation Koreans in Japan came from Southern provinces, many refused to accept this compromise. Years of oppression had led them to become anti-Japanese, and North Korea's record of resistance to colonial authorities had a romantic appeal. The Korean War that started in June 1950 intensified the differences between North and South, but many who did go back to North Korea found devastation that

"Hidden Treasures: Lives of First-Generation Korean Women in Japan"

by Jackie J. Kim

(Rowman & Littlefield Publishers Inc.,

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resigned them to return to Japan, dashing any hope of going home to former lives.

"ALL THEIR STORIES had a certain amount of shock to it," Kim said of her female subjects. "Most became the breadwinners in their households. In the midst of hardship they came up with a lot of different strategies to survive, doing things like selling rice on the black market, bootlegging, working in factories, collecting trash, things like that, along with raising their families in a foreign culture.

"A lot -- not all of them -- also had to go through domestic violence. Their husbands felt inadequate in a foreign country because they couldn't get jobs, couldn't take care of their families. A lot of them had inner anger, so they would take it out on their wives and children. So in the midst of hardship, these women had trouble in their own households.

"When many of these women looked back at their lives, they weren't angry or bitter and thought, 'I wonder how I made it, but I did it.' For many their only regret was that they never learned to read or write.

"It was interesting to see their strategies for survival. It kind of made me wonder, if I were in their shoes, could I have done what they did?"

Kim said she was happy for the opportunity to write the book, to provide an outlet for the "long-silent voices of the women."

Such human stories often go ignored by historians in favor of the facts of body counts, dollars spent and weaponry used. Textbook facts merely scratch the surface in conveying the full story of war's pervasive ugliness to future generations.

The women profiled often ended up being misunderstood by their own children, adding to their pain.

"The view of the first generation has changed a lot over the years. Many of the second generation, and the third as well, had a negative view of the first generation. They represented a Korean-ness that (younger generations) wanted to distance themselves from," Kim said.

"They were very familiar with society's view that Koreans were uneducated, ignorant and dirty. They grew up with a lot of prejudices in the schools and in the workplace, so they really had to decide who to tell they were Korean and who not.

"But now when the daughters, who are now 55 to 60, talk about their mothers, you can feel an overwhelming sense of pride and admiration for the way they overcame great difficulties. It's changed their image of themselves as Koreans."

But dissonance remains, she said. "(The second generation) don't feel completely like they belong in Japan, nor do they belong in Korea. The only image they have of Korea is through the stories of their fathers and mothers.

"For the third generation, it's becoming trendy to be Korean because of Korea's economic expansion and cultural exchange. Now, when I go back, my Japanese friends ask, 'Do you watch Korean dramas?' Before, they were on really late, like 1 or 2 in the morning. Now, they're on at prime time."

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Factory work in Japan was like slavery

The following excerpt is a story told by Pak Hui-Sun (Uehara Tamae) to author Jackie J. Kim in "Hidden Treasures: Lives of First-Generation Korean Women in Japan"

At the (Morimata cookie) factory, they told me not to wear the *chogori* (Korean linen outfit), and so I would only wear its black skirt, and instead of its white vest-blouse, wear a pullover that my mother got at a secondhand store. At the factory, I was the first and only Korean. Then after a while, about a dozen other Korean kids came to work and naturally we spoke to each other in Korean. We always had a morning meeting before we started work, and the manager always ended the meeting saying that our Japan was one Japan, and therefore we should speak our country's language and we should not speak other languages like Korean. But still, whenever we gathered, we spoke in Korean. A while later the manager went as far as putting up a sign with a small can attached to a bamboo pole that read, "ONE SEN FINE FOR SPEAKING KOREAN." Sometimes, we would each have to put in five or six sen a day.

At that time I was making 80 sen for a whole day's work. It wasn't even one yen. We didn't get Sundays off, just two days off a month, the first and the 15th. I would start work at 7 in the morning and work until 5 in the evening. ... It was almost like slavery. Whatever the factory told you to do, you had to do. Meanwhile, the war was getting more intense and the factory was slowing its production. Many people were laid off or moved to other factories, and there were only five of us left in our group. ... So we five Korean girls became a five-member team. But the Japanese workers expressed so much dislike toward us that one day we all decided to quit together. Although searching for work elsewhere would be troublesome, and of course in the beginning we wouldn't receive much salary, still, we decided that less money was better than having to deal with so much discrimination. ...

After quitting the cookie factory, we all got another factory job, this time making knitted work gloves for soldiers. ... This factory paid us for the number of gloves we produced, rather than an hourly wage ... We worked at the new factory for about 10 days. One day I returned home from work and my mother looked frightened and said that a postcard had come from the police station calling me in. ... All five of us had the same postcard from the police. None of us had any clue why. ...



COURTESY OF JACKIE J. KIM

Pak Hui-Sun, center, and her Korean co-workers were discouraged from speaking their native language and wearing Korean clothing. Here, they are dressed for a Japanese festival.

The next day, my friends and I went to the police station quite early and waited outside until a policeman told us to come inside. Soon we were all called and taken into separate rooms where we were questioned. I was so scared, I couldn't think straight. The policeman asked me why I quit the cookie factory. ... He said that I would spend the night there and they wouldn't send me home until I answered all of his questions. So I said that from the beginning, the factory treated us Koreans badly and made us pay a penalty for speaking Korean. The work itself was fine, but the atmosphere created by the other Japanese workers was hard to bear. ...

The policeman asked me if I was willing to go back to that factory. ... He said that because of our selfishness, we were committing a disservice not only to the (cookie) factory but also to the country during this time of war when factories were short of workers. He said that if we refused to go back to the factory, we would be sent away as part of the *teishintai*.

The *teishintai* was sending young girls abroad to Manchuria and elsewhere to help the soldiers with cooking, cleaning, and running errands, including taking ammunition to the front lines. I didn't know it then, but I realized later that *teishintai* was actually *ianfu* ("comfort women," the sexual slaves of the Japanese military). We were only 17 or 18 years old. We didn't know anything. Just hearing the word Manchuria and thinking that I would have to leave my mother and go off to a faraway country made me want to plead for my life, and I begged to be allowed to go back to the cookie factory. ... I was afraid of what my friends would think about my cowardice. I confessed and found out that they had said the same thing. Just thinking about having to go off to Manchuria made me burst into tears. All of my friends and I were grabbing each other and crying. ...

Toward the end of the war, with the military situation getting quite serious, we heard that a cookie factory was being built in Manchuria. The factory recruited people to go and work there. Three other Koreans decided to go. A while later, the factory in Japan closed down. After it was gone, my friends and I were so happy.

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