

Interviewer:

Good morning. Today is June 17, 2015, and I'm here in the West Point Center for Oral History with Mrs. Sung Yoon. Good morning, Mrs. Yoon.

Sung Yoon:

Good morning.

Interviewer:

Could you please tell us your full name, and spell your first and last name for us, please?

Sung Yoon:

My full name is Sungae Yoon, but I go by Sung Yoon, which is easy to remember. I just say, "Sing, Sang, Song, Sung," so they will remember me; Sung easy. It's a spelling S-U-N-G.

Interviewer:

Mm-hmm, okay, very good, thank you. Can you tell us a little bit about where you were born, and when you were born?

Sung Yoon:

I was born on 1950, June 27, which is two days after Korean War broke.

Interviewer:

Okay.

Sung Yoon:

I was born in Hung Su Won which is North Korea.

Interviewer:

Okay. And what did your parents do?

Sung Yoon:

My parents was pastor in North Korea. At that time, it's not North and South yet, so they are not a Communist yet, so my father was preaching in a small church in Hung Su Won, which is Hwanghae Providence, and he was still a seminary student. So he's like commuting from North Korea to South Korea to finishing his last year seminary, and one semester more he need to go, so he's coming back weekend to preach and stay with my mother. But he goes back to school in Monday by train.

Interviewer:

Okay. So he was traveling north and south, up and down the country.

Sung Yoon:

Yes.

Interviewer:

Okay.

Sung Yoon:

It's not that long distance, because Hwanghaedo is just up in north of, a few hours north of Seoul.

Interviewer:

Okay, very good. How many siblings did you have?

Sung Yoon:

I have four altogether at this time.

Interviewer:

Okay.

Sung Yoon:

But when we are in North Korea, I was only, you know, few months old, and then my sister was four years old.

Interviewer:

Okay, so just the two of you.

Sung Yoon:

Two of us at the time.

Interviewer:

Okay. And how did your life change when the Korean War broke out?

Sung Yoon:

Korean War broke out, my parents married in North Korea, and my mother came from very rich family. At that time, in 1940s and '30s, when they're growing up, the Japanese ruled Korea, so actually my parents grew up during the North Korean, I mean Japanese ruling. So they learned Japanese, and then they had a lot of things live by Japanese rule. But they're also oppressing Christians, North Koreans - I mean Japanese - but my parents are very devout Christian.

Interviewer:

Okay.

Sung Yoon:

And they - because of oppression of Christians, and then also at the time, little bit of Communist are growing up in North, so Communist, you know, they are ruling even the seminary teaching. That's why my father attended P'yongyang Seminary. That's the only seminary I think the American missionaries started. But the P'yongyang Seminary, they don't under ruled by Communist policies, so they I think broke off from P'yongyang Seminary, and they started new one in Seoul.

Interviewer:

Okay, and so that's why your father -

Sung Yoon:

Father followed that; that's why they only need, like he need only one more semester to go.

Interviewer:

Okay. And so when the war started, your father was down south, correct?

Sung Yoon:

War started, he still he's commuting, south and then north, coming, you know, weekend he comes to the church and then preach and then stay with my mother.

Interviewer:

And how did everything change for you after the war?

Sung Yoon:

So after war, my mother told me that when, you know, I was born, he said that the bombing already started, so my grandmother told my mother you have to cover - you know, they only stayed in our home, where even they delivered. Usually, you know, grandmother help them and all that. Sometimes the midwife will help, but I think when I was born my grandmother helped my mother. So they want to cover all the doors or windows. That way, you know, bombing men not see the light. So my mother told me even it was summer, hot summer, she need to cover all the window with a blanket so that the light will not go out, so house will be protected from bombing.

Interviewer:

Okay.

Sung Yoon:

Yeah. So you know, when I was born, it was during the war, so it was very - my mother told me it was very hard, because people want to go to South, so people would not stay in their home. So she said that she was the only few church member staying in that village, because a lot of people want to go down to South. But my mother want to stay there until all the church members, you know, occupy - I mean moved out.

Interviewer:

All right. So she stayed up north for a while.

Sung Yoon:

Yes.

Interviewer:

Now, were there North Korean soldiers around in your village?

Sung Yoon:

She said it was North Korean, and then even Chinese soldiers passing by the village, and

then it was a lot of scary moment, she said. And then she - and sheâ€™s always expecting my father coming back, but certain point, he couldnâ€™t come back.

Interviewer:

He had to stay down south.

Sung Yoon:

Stay down south, because itâ€™s blocked; the passage blocked.

Interviewer:

Okay. And was your mom trying to make plans to link back up with your father?

Sung Yoon:

At that time they didnâ€™t have any kind of communication.

Interviewer:

Wow.

Sung Yoon:

So she said she was only 29 years old - young woman with two children - she was devastated.

Interviewer:

Yeah.

Sung Yoon:

She said that she didnâ€™t know what to do; she just crying out to God, praying that she will meet her husband.

Interviewer:

Yeah. And was her family helping her?

Sung Yoon:

Her family did a few more hours north, and at that time she only get help from the church members. But all the church members, unfortunately, leaving young pastorâ€™s wife, because theyâ€™re thinking young woman with two children will delay their journey.

Interviewer:

Okay. So they thought that she would slow them down.

Sung Yoon:

Mm-hmm.

Interviewer:

And so they all moved south -

Sung Yoon:

Yes.

Interviewer:

Okay. At some point did the American Army and the South Korean Army pass through your village heading north?

Sung Yoon:

Thatâ€™s right. That time was like November, after I think the amphibious landing in Inchon, and the U.N. Army and American Army pushing north. So that time, they said that, â€œNow you can follow U.N. Army, and then you can just follow south.â€ So my mother decide to leave the village to go south at that time with, you know, Army leading them out.

Interviewer:

Okay.

Sung Yoon:

So it was a good I think determination in my motherâ€™s part.

Interviewer:

Right.

Sung Yoon:

Because she never been to south.

Interviewer:

Okay. And so she had to pretty much carry everything that she wanted to take with her, right, including you.

Sung Yoon:

Not that much she can carry, because she has four years old daughter, and then four month old baby. So the people, you know, even though a lot of people left, there is some people around, and they said, "Maybe you need to make some kind of heavy clothing," because it was November, and then you need to walk to south. So she said a few days and night she's preparing heavy clothing for, you know, two children and herself. And then maybe she can only carry like one bag. You know, how can she carry more than, you know, bag and then hold the one baby in her hand and one in her back? So actually she didn't have that much.

Interviewer:

Wow - that's incredible. So what sort of trials did she go through as she was walking south?

Sung Yoon:

So that is the one, she gave me the verse all her life. This is Deuteronomy 29:5, saying, "I have led you 40 years in the wilderness. Your clothes have not worn out on you, and your sandals have not worn off your feet." This is my mother's theme verse. She said she walked 40 days and 40 nights, and her clothes did not worn out, and her sandal, her shoes did not worn off from her foot. So that's her testimony. That's why I share this story to many different Christian communities, like P.W.O.C.s and others. Of course a lot of ladies want to hear about my mother's testimony. I said, "My mother's exodus from North Korea to South."

Because in the Bible story, Israelite, it took 40 years for them to exodus from Egypt to Israel. But my mother took 40 days, so I said, you know, "40 days" exodus from North Korea to South Korea.

Interviewer:

Okay. And so earlier you said you tell that story to P.W.O.C., so for our viewers, I'll say P.W.O.C. is the Protestant Women of the Chapel.

Sung Yoon:

That's right. In West Point and wherever I go, you know, I share the story, because this is a living witness from my mother; it's a living testimony.

Interviewer:

Yeah, sure. And so what was the hardest thing that she had to face while she was moving south?

Sung Yoon:

Okay. The first thing, she doesn't have any kind of direction, because she never been traveling to south, because all her life she's in North Korea. So no direction, and then no news, and then not enough food to eat. So hunger, fear, and she doesn't know, you know, where she going to stay, so no lodging. So it's almost like adventure for her. So her belief in God - that's the only thing she can cling to at that point. And she said along the way, there was like a refugee meeting. It's like some Christians, so they are passing through the church one Sunday, so they said, "Even we are passing, you know, during the war, but we want to worship." So they went into the church in Sunday morning. And they went in there all together and then praying in - they don't want to stay in like a sanctuary, so they went into next to the sanctuary. There is a prayer room, so there was like 20 or 30 people laying down praying and worshipping God, even that time. And they said sometimes like the North Korean Army chasing behind them, and that they came into that room with a gun point. And she said that this North Korean man, and then I think a Chinese Army, came in. They said, "There is no one," and then they walk out. So until this time, she said, "God covered this man's eyes so he didn't see it, so he just walk out." He's saying he saw nobody, and then he walk out.

Interviewer:

Wow.

Sung Yoon:

So after that, they are so thankful. They thought that they would die, but it was God

preserving them. And then they walk out, and they are passing their journey again, and they saw in front of them people that don't want to stop for the worshipping God - they all died, because they stepped onto mine field.

Interviewer:

Wow.

Sung Yoon:

So that time, my mother said, "Because we kept our faith in God, God preserving us, not stepping in that mine field." So each moment, my mother it's like experiencing God through her journey. So there was another thing. And then one time, she said she was so hungry, you know, I'm crying, baby's crying. So she went into she said it must be American Army camp. The soldiers standing up there, and then, "Why you passing through here?" So my mother doesn't speak any English, so she just saying, you know, "Baby." She said, "No milk, no milk, so baby crying," and she just had the hand gesture. And these soldier, these American Army, you know, he brought like a bag of rice.

So she was so thankful, she said, that with that rice she made rice cake, and she made the rice, and she said that she had more like a banquet at that time.

Interviewer:

Yeah. Wow. A banquet with just a bag of rice.

Sung Yoon:

Rice, yes.

Interviewer:

Wow. And so she continued on her journey, and what else happened to her?

Sung Yoon:

Okay. So I think she started with my aunt, and along the way, she lost my aunt. And another important thing is she said how God protected myself and my sister and my mother. They need to cross the river. That river was like freezing temperature, and it was already that time is middle of November. I think that they said 1950 November was the coldest winter at that time, and then the river was a freezing river. So when they came out from river, they said that their clothing is wet and it's like freezing, so it's like all frost. So my feet - the four month old baby's feet is in the water, because the water coming her waist.

Sung Yoon:

So my mother put me in her back with a Korean blanket, so my feet is already in the water, and my mom and then my baby sister, four year old sister, somebody put her in his neck. So she crossed without problem, but my mother's way under the waist down is all wet in the water. My feet is all wet in there. And she said it was safe; when they came out, they wipe it out and all that. She said my feet was okay, and then she's okay, and she's so thankful. So she said she didn't know what to do when she arrived Seoul, and she said God gave her wisdom. She's thinking, "Okay, I will go railroad track, and then if I follow railroad track, it will go down to the south. So I will just follow railroad track." So she follow the railroad track.

And then she arrive a certain village - it was like Cheongju Province - and Cheongju City, she remembered the pastor's name, and then she remembered that the church. He is the one that wed my mother and my father in way back in North Korea. So she said, "Maybe I will go to see him. Then maybe he will know my husband's news, so maybe where he is, or maybe seminary move to, you know, south, where." So she just need to go see him. So she went her village, and she said it took 40 days altogether when she arrived at Cheongju city. And you know, 1950 and November and December, so many refugees going down to the south.

So she said a lot of villages, people were very kind and generous to open their empty rooms to share with refugees. So she went in one house, and there happened to be the member of that church members, that my mother's looking for that Pastor Kim. So he went there, she went there, and then she gave her room. So she stay there, and then she, later she met my aunt. That's another providence of God, because my aunt was a

better situation than my mother, because she had two teenagers children, two teenagers and then one four year old and one baby, like my mother. So these two teenager children helped her mom, his - I mean so my aunt was much better than my mother's situation. And they had the same idea, and they arrived at the city, and then they are looking for somebody's house to lodge in. And then happened to be in my mother's house, so she stayed a couple days in one room, all these children, and then, you know, two women, stayed in one room. And then later on, that church provide the lodging for my mom and my aunt.

Interviewer:

Wow. That's amazing that she -

Sung Yoon:

Yeah, live together.

Interviewer:

That they all could find each other.

Sung Yoon:

Mm-hmm. So it's like each step of that 40 days, not only 40 days, right after she arrived in that Cheongju City, even meeting them together, that is God bringing them together. So that's why it's like hearing that story, it's like goose bump. We can hear that God's miraculous leading to my mother to south.

Interviewer:

And when did you finally run into your father?

Sung Yoon:

That's another miracle. So that Cheongju City, that church provide a special camp for the pastors' family from North Korea, especially for North Korea the refugee families, for pastoring and Christian families. So they stayed there, and the people - I think the lay pastor who work in that church went that they go, where is a Camp Walker at Daegu city. And there was a Missionary Campbell - he was a very famous missionary at that time, helping a lot of pastors. And my father went to meet Missionary Campbell, asking maybe, you know, he can pastoring some southern church where they need a pastor, all that. And then this lay pastor from Cheongju City, where my mother lodging in, and he came to meet Pastor Campbell, and my father happened to ask him, "Do you know two young women from North Korea with little children?" And he said, "Are you Pastor Park?" And you know, he said, "Yes, I am Pastor Park." And he said, "They're in our church camp."

Interviewer:

Wow.

Sung Yoon:

That was in May in 1951. So right that moment my father said, "This is God who brought that pastor in that place," and my father ask him, "If you just even know who they are, and then maybe, maybe not." So my uncle and my father, they both attending seminary, so they both work together, so they both knew their wives in there. So they came to city, and the first thing my father asking my mom is, "Is Sungae still alive?" That was the first question my father asked. So they met, and then the Missionary Campbell introduced my father to small village church which is closed down during Japanese ruling. He said, "Pastor Park would you like to rebuild this church?" So he moved to like it's a - I don't know now - the city became, I mean the village became much bigger, because between Daegu and Gimcheon, it's like in the middle way. It's a small village, but now they said that the church is much very large now, 65 years old, so it's a much bigger church. But when my father went there, they said the Japanese, they just burned out all the churches, so there was no church at all. But he went in there 1951, and he started a new church over there.

Interviewer:

And so by this time you were all together again -

Sung Yoon:

Yes.

Interviewer:

And he was rebuilding a church. And how did the rest of the war go for your family?

Sung Yoon:

Mm-hmm. So because of the war, my grandparents and then all the family members - uncles and aunt - and nobody came to south except my father's brother, older brother, the seminary student. So in South Korea, we only have my uncle and then my father; that's the only extended family. So I asked them why grandparents or uncle and aunt didn't come out? They are thinking, "This war is not going to be that long," so they are thinking, "Why bother to go south and then coming back? We want to keep our property, and we want to keep our house here, until war finished." So they didn't believe this war going to be like this.

Interviewer:

Do you still have family in North Korea?

Sung Yoon:

Yes, but we never know about, because there is no communication, so we don't know, you know they are still alive, how they are doing - we have no idea.

Interviewer:

Wow.

Sung Yoon:

This year it's like 65th anniversary of Korean War.

Interviewer:

Right.

Sung Yoon:

And we have no idea.

Interviewer:

Wow.

Sung Yoon:

My mother is 94 years old, and my father is 93 years old. They are still alive, and my father still preaching in New York church every Sunday afternoon.

Interviewer:

Where does he live?

Sung Yoon:

They are in Woodside New York. He came to America 1975, and he started a Korean Church in New York Queens area, where a lot of Korean immigrant. So he started 40 years ago in 1975; this year is our church's 40th anniversary, and he's still preaching.

Interviewer:

And your mother is still -

Sung Yoon:

Still alive.

Interviewer:

And how about your older sister?

Sung Yoon:

My older sister, she's 69 years old, and after my parents met in 1951, they had another child, so my younger sister. She is 62 this year, so she was born 1953. And then while my father preaching in that small village church, 1956, another child, so that is my youngest and only brother, and he became a pastor, so he's pastoring together with my father in New York, Queens, yes. So altogether, four of us.

Interviewer:

Now, when did you come to America?

Sung Yoon:

I came to America in 1972 with my husband.

Interviewer:

Okay. So tell us a little bit about your husband.

Sung Yoon:

My husband, when I met my husband in 1969, he was a Korean Army Medical Officer stationed in near DMZ. And his sister attend our, my father's church in Yeongdeungpo in Seoul, so he came to visit his sister, and then he's attending our church whenever he comes. So my mother and his sister like half matchmaker, so they introduced us and we met, and then we married.

Interviewer:

Very nice. And -

Sung Yoon:

And then he - because Korean Army is like mandatory, so he need to go to Army anyway. So he served Army, and he discharged as honorable, you know, discharge, and his brother came to America like late '50s as a student. And he's in New York in the Queens area, so he said, "Why don't you come to America?" At early '70s, American hospitals, they need a lot of doctors, so if you pass like ECFMG and then oral test, you can join like American hospital. So he's invited, he was invited as a medical doctor in American hospital.

Interviewer:

Okay. And so he served, he became a doctor and has been a doctor ever since.

Sung Yoon:

Yes. He was a doctor even in Korea.

Interviewer:

Wonderful.

Sung Yoon:

Mm-hmm. So he served as a Medical Officer in Korean Army, and he came to America 1972, he had internship and residency and fellowship in, you know, America, and he got American Academy of Pediatrics certificate. And then he had a private practice in New York, I mean in Queens, and finally he's joined the Army in 1985, and he served 20 years as Active Duty Regular Army Medical Officer.

Interviewer:

Wonderful. Where were you stationed?

Sung Yoon:

Our first duty station was Germany, Würzburg, Germany, and then we came to Fort Meade, and we went to Yongsan, and we came to Fort Hood, and our last duty station was at West Point.

Interviewer:

Wonderful. So what was it like being an Army spouse?

Sung Yoon:

It's - we are laughing, we are still laughing, because when I married to my husband, he was a Korean Army Medical Officer, so I am thinking, "Korean Army and American Army might be same kind of Army in rule." So I'm thinking, "I don't want to be an Army Officer's wife." So after he finished his training, his first job was a civilian pediatrician at Army Hospital. That was at Fort Monmouth So he worked as a civilian pediatrician, and he's working with Army Officer pediatricians. So this pediatrician encouraged my husband to join the Army. So he has his mind, he's thinking, "Maybe I will join the American Army, and I'll be a Medical Officer." So I said, "No, I don't want to be again the Army wife; I don't want to move around," and so he said, "Okay, then maybe we'll open our practice." So that first attempt, he didn't win me, so we had our private practice in New York - Flushing and Elmhurst. So he had a very successful private practice as a pediatrician. And back in his mind is still have a desire of Army, and then there was a recruiter still contact him. And about 1985, he's thinking, "Maybe we need to think a little more seriously, and I really would like to be a Military Officer. So let's pray about it." Because his age was



like 43 at that time.

So we said, "Okay, we'll pray, and if they are accepting you as a Medical Officer, and then we can retire, then maybe there might be God's opening door like that way. And if not, then you fail, then we will just practice." So God opened the door for us. There was like a brand-new beginning in our life.

Interviewer:

What was your favorite post?

Sung Yoon:

WÃ¼rzburg, Germany

Interviewer:

Why?

Sung Yoon:

Because that was my first experience as American Military Officer's wife, and because we never been travel to overseas at that time, and I needed to learn a lot of things. And that WÃ¼rzburg base - we live outside the leased quarter in Oberdurrbach It's about 15 minute from base. But right into - you know, because I'm new in military, I'm new in overseas, no family members, I don't know any soul, but we went the chapel. I still remember Leighton Barracks chapel while we are staying in guest house. And we met wonderful chaplains and their wives.

And they just leading me to the P.W.O.C., and then all other activities. And I have a fond memory, and I love all these women, and I love all the chapel activities I had done in WÃ¼rzburg. Now it's, you know, they closed the WÃ¼rzburg, so no more about, you know.

Interviewer:

So the secret is getting involved in things.

Sung Yoon:

That's right.

Interviewer:

Okay. And what was it like going back to Korea with the Army?

Sung Yoon:

That was another thing. So when we first moved to Germany, we stayed four years, and then we came back to Fort Meade. There was like a first assignment in United States as military. So we had a overseas tour, and then inside tour, so we are thinking we experienced both tours, so at that time it's eight years. So we need to decide we want to stay in the Army and retire, or we want to get out. So we are thinking about maybe get out, and then stay, many prayers, many interviews and all that, and they said, "Do you want to go to Yongsan?" So we said, "Oo, we never been back there." It was 1993. That is like exactly 20 years since we left Korea. So we said, "It would be wonderful to go back to our mother country," so we went back. And we both had the culture shock.

Interviewer:

Oh yeah?

Sung Yoon:

Because 1972 when we left Korea, we are still struggling from the war, and we didn't have our subways, we didn't have high rises. We even didn't have our private vehicle; only company president or rich people own their own cars. So we have only bus and few taxis, like that. And we landed at that time was the Gimpo Airport; there's all these high rises. It was like, "I cannot believe this is the country we left in 1972." And all clean. You know, subway system and all that. It really was very exciting to see different country.

Interviewer:

So it was a good tour.

Sung Yoon:

Yes.

Interviewer:

Good. What other lessons do you have about being an Army spouse?

Sung Yoon:

I learned a lot of different things; to learn different cultures, different background, different even our belief, you know, denominations. Because my father is a Presbyterian pastor, I only thought Presbyterian is right, and then that's only denomination is good believer. But I met Southern Baptist, I met Methodist, and many different denominations, and then we are all serving God. So I can have a little bit broader acceptance about my belief. It does not mean everything is right. I mean inside of our church, I mean inside of a chapel community.

Interviewer:

So the Army showed you that having a broad perspective and an open mind is a good thing.

Sung Yoon:

That's right. Even like background, I mean nationalities and background, cultures; it was a wonderful experience for me.

Interviewer:

Now, when did your husband retire?

Sung Yoon:

He retired 2005.

Interviewer:

Okay. And yet you're still active in the West Point community.

Sung Yoon:

Yes.

Interviewer:

And you do a lot of things with -

Sung Yoon:

P.W.O.C.

Interviewer:

Yeah, and the Reading Club.

Sung Yoon:

Reading Club, yes.

Interviewer:

The golf club, you play golf.

Sung Yoon:

Golf, yeah, ladies' golf. And I also start the Korean Ladies' Bible Study inside the post. So last six years I teach the Bible studies in the P.W.O.C., and also I teach in Korean Ladies' Bible Study, and I also do Korean Radio Broadcast Bible Teaching in New York City.

Interviewer:

Okay. So why is it so important to you to stay connected to the West Point community?

Sung Yoon:

Because when we retired, we are thinking, he's thinking about living some other post, like Pennsylvania, Carlisle area, or like there. But our last duty station is West Point, 2000. We moved here in 1998, and until 2005, because he's thinking West Point is a unique post. All the Cadets, and then family members, and supporting Cadet. So we are thinking this post is a very important post; it's a military, you know, American military, so we would like to support this post as much as we can.

Interviewer:

And so have you taken an active role in mentoring young wives?

Sung Yoon:

Yes. While we are in housing, we did a lot contacting with military Cadets, especially Korean Cadets, in the Cadet Chapel, so they visited us and have a Korean meal together, because it's easy to walk out from Cadet Chapel to our house in Lusk. So it was a

good time we shared with the Korean Cadets. Not particularly only one or two, but whoever is available that Sunday, you know, we available, then we just bring them up, and we share the meal, and we share our faith and our culture and how proud we are as a Korean, and that we are proud of them. After that, since we are not in community - we bought a house in Fort Montgomery.

So I cannot do involved with Cadets anymore, because distance. But I'm still involved with P.W.O.C., and then Korean Ladies, because they are young. I'm considering them sometimes they are thinking I am too old, because our culture, the age is very important. So they are thinking I am very much a senior for them, so they're thinking I cannot I cannot delight you as a friend friend or peer, something like that. But I said, "No, you don't have to think about it. I'm Americanized. You don't have to say, "Mrs. Yoon," or you don't have to say highly like Korean culture. But we are in America, so you can call me Sung."

Sometimes they say "big sister," like that, so you know I am just giving them how much important as a military wives. You know, we support husband, we pray for them, we pray for West Point Cadets, you pray for this community, and protection, and all that kind very important things happening in here. So I am very proud and privileged by this kind of a role I can do it here in West Point.

Interviewer:

Wow. Well, Mrs. Yoon, this has been a wonderful interview, and thank you so much for telling us your story. It's been an honor for us.

Sung Yoon:

Thank you to give me a chance to share my story.