

## Father's Life in His Own Words - Part 37

Sun Myung Moon

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*War refugees were using anything that will float to evacuate Hungnam*

### **Imprisonment in Pyongyang and then at Hungnam special labor camp**

#### **The value of food**

Even now, when I am hungry my mind stirs with the thought of how precious even one grain of rice is. You have to be able to feel how a single grain stimulates your nerves and appreciate its infinite value. Although I was hungry, yearning for food, I tried to forget that and yearn for God more instead, to the point of shedding tears. Rice is good, but even barley or wheat is adequate, or oats. I was more grateful to eat that than to have a king's feast. I am the king in terms of appreciating the taste of rice. During the years I was eating salty soup, though, I led a life of expressing gratitude to God in tears. While eating meals of barley, I thought of the hunger my ancestors experienced. I imagined I was eating the fruit of my ancestors' hard work. Even though I knew God's will, and had to preserve God's dignity, I did not leave any residue. I ate it all.

In prison, your sense of smell becomes very keen. Not even a dog's sense of smell can compare to it. You can tell when someone is cooking beef broth a couple of miles away.

Prison is the best place in the world to learn the value of food. You become so hungry that a single grain of rice seems several times larger than the earth.

#### **Starvation diet**

You received about 1.7 small bowls of rice a day, no side dishes, and salt water for soup. You worked eight hard hours on that food. The meal was so meager, that you could finish it in three bites. The soup was radish leaves and salt in water - that was all. It was like the expression "water that a pig had walked through." Sometimes the soup was so salty you couldn't finish it. Nevertheless, even on your deathbed you didn't want to give up the soup.

If someone didn't work, he'd get only a half ration of rice. Getting only that half-sized lump would make you feel so miserable. Because of the food, people on the brink of death still went out and worked.

Unconsciously, you'd pour the rice into your mouth as soon as you received it. You wouldn't realize you'd eaten any food. When you saw other people getting their bowl of rice, you'd realize your bowl is empty. Often people would fight with the person next to them, saying, You ate my food! Some people died from suffocation when the rice they'd taken in all at once obstructed their breathing.

When a man died without finishing his rice, other men fought for the food still in his mouth. Without their being consciously aware, men's chopsticks would stray toward their neighbor's bowl. You can't imagine how horrible it felt when you realized that the bowl belonged to the person next to you. Your saliva would become like chewing gum.

When a visitor brought soybean flour, you'd knead it and make bread. If the flour fell on a stone, people would fight over the stone so they could eat the powder. Even liver oil mixed with water was very tasty. Uncooked soybeans also tasted so good. When you got one more grain of rice, that extra grain was like gold. If a grain of rice fell on the ground, no matter how dirty it was, men would fight over it.

The prison was like the valley of death. Over the course of a year, 40 percent of the prisoners died...The communists' policy was to work prisoners to death. Even mercilessness has limits, but that situation was far beyond such limits.

### **Even religious leaders lost their way**

When I was in the prison, I stayed with many religious leaders and prominent members of society. As it turned out, they'd been reduced to living for food. One well-known pastor said, "In that place of hunger, no matter how much I searched for God, He did not seem to be there. Even His shadow did not appear. God may have given up, or He's run away." Some church ministers even became materialists while in the prison.

A pastor famous in his region was sent to the prison with his son-in-law. His son-in-law became sick with malaria, which was noted for causing a high fever at a particular time each day. The pastor didn't share the medicine he had in his possession even with his son-in-law. Instead, he bartered it for someone else's soybean flour. He was a pastor obsessed with food. He is still around,[\[1\]](#) though I will not name him.



*In the years between the nation's liberation from being an annexed territory of the Japanese Empire and civil war, most Koreans were peasant farmers*

### **Three weeks on half rations**

How could I survive in that kind of environment? I was determined to do so through spiritual power. I planted the firm conviction in my mind that I could live on half the meal I was given. From the next day, I started to share the other half with my fellow prisoners. I did that for three weeks. I convinced myself that I could carry my workload even on half the scanty rations. After three weeks, I began eating the whole

meal. I thought to myself that the second half had been given by God.

After training myself in this way, if any extra food came, I wouldn't even touch it. If for instance you were offered some soybean flour, how strong your desire would be to eat it! But I wouldn't touch it, or look at it; otherwise that would have been the way of death. We must develop rules to limit what we eat, and so pioneer the path ahead.

### **The buckwheat conundrum**

If I think about this during a meal, I can't eat anymore. I remember the days from December 14 to 28, 1949. You know buckwheat. For that period, buckwheat that was only half-peeled was provided as a meal. On the first day we ate it, our faces swelled up. We needed to eat it because we were hungry, but buckwheat is difficult to chew, so we just swallowed it. That's how we became sick. I knew that. To avoid the problem, I peeled off each buckwheat seed before I ate it. I can't forget doing that. We could not throw such food away, but ate everything. I thought about how we could eat this. After eating the buckwheat, we got diarrhea because we couldn't digest it. This painful experience in prison was a most unforgettable one.

When I think about the experience of eating the buckwheat, I cannot complain at mealtimes. I think about what it was like in that situation. I cannot complain about a lack of side dishes. I am grateful for what is provided.

### **Sharing with others**

When someone's family or friends visited him in prison, they would bring something to eat. Even if his loving mother or wife came to see him, his eyes would go first to the food she had brought, rather than to her face. There was no sadder moment than if he discovered she hadn't brought any soybean flour or anything else to eat.

When I was in Hungnam, I received soybean flour once a month. Since there were thirty people in a cell, there wasn't much to share with each person. I gave each of them a spoonful on a piece of newspaper. The days when I shared the soybean flour were like feast days. Even though it was precious to me, I could not keep it all for myself.

I also mixed the powder with water to make soybean flour cakes. I packed the cakes in newspaper and took them to work. Because I would sweat a lot until lunchtime, the cakes would become wet. Still, when I shared them out, tears would trickle down a man's face as he ate it. What a precious life it was! By sharing my food and supporting them, I became their friend, in place of their mothers and older brothers.

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[1] Father said this in 1973.