Father's Life in His Own Words - Part 47

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Father a War Refugee in Busan

> Father joined hundreds of thousands of war refugees in Busan, on Korea's south coast - one of the few cities virtually untouched by the Korean War. Busan's normal population of some 880,000 was swollen by half a million that had fled south to escape the fighting. Father arrived there on January 27, 1951, in the middle of winter. It was here that, after experiencing the same challenges as every refugee faced, he made a new beginning.

Surviving as a refugee

When I arrived in Busan, it was flooded with people; they were packed in like sardines. There were no rooms available anywhere. Any hole or spot under an eave - any place that could serve as a shelter - was filled with people. In every trash can or empty box even, 2 or 3 people would be squeezed in. All the refugees who had fled from all over Korea gathered in Busan. It was like a melting pot. There was no space even to put your foot down. Every village around Busan was also overflowing with people. Even when trying to just stand still, you would be jostled this way and that. That was daily life.

I even acted like a beggar, a real beggar. I begged to get money for food, and no one could surpass me as a beggar. Only the quick-witted can do it well. I would look at a person, and if he didn't give me money, I might say, "Hey, is that all you are? Good things will happen if you support passers-by like us." You could say I am the ancestor of fundraising!

After arriving in Busan, I had nothing to wear and nothing to eat. I had to make money, even a few pennies, so I worked at various odd jobs. What could we do? We worked during the night and slept during the day. I can still recall how we used to shiver at night, even as we stamped our feet. Even at such a time as that, I prayed, "Father, please don't worry about me. I will follow in Your footsteps with joy; the track of Your sorrowful lamentation I will follow with hope." Even in those circumstances I was still able to begin a new church movement.

I had no home of my own. In early February when it was cold, I would lay down on my military coat and wrap myself up in it. I still remember that experience. I asked a member to keep that coat as a memento, but someone threw it away because it was old and tattered. If that coat had been preserved so that you could see it today, you would shed tears. It was such a memorable coat. Living like that, I walked step by step to lay the foundation we have today.

Because it was very cold, I worked during the night and slept during the day, from around 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. It was good to sleep on the sunny side of the hill, sitting still and sleeping like a pheasant. I am a man who loves nature. When I felt like it, I would stop to sleep in a field while walking across it, or sit on

a rock and doze. I often did things like that. Why? When I stood up after sitting somewhere, I could feel that what I'd been sitting on felt sorry to see me go. Even if it were just a rock, if I slept on it; it was not merely a rock but something more precious than my own home.

Nurses washing orphans in the city of Daegu in November 1950

When I returned to work at night, I would cause a minor sensation. Everyone flocked to my side. I would tell an interesting story, and they would bring their food and share it with each other. That's why, if you see a laborer sitting on the roadside in snow or sleet, in a wretched state, he or she should remind you of me and you should think, "Father did that kind of work too."

When it's cold, people all flock to sunny places. We would go someplace sunny and we'd say to people there, "You've had breakfast and lunch, haven't you? We haven't had breakfast yet, so please give us a bit of space and let us eat in peace." Then we'd sit in a circle in the sun and have our meal. It is nice to eat under such circumstances. There is a hidden philosophy there: everyone is my friend, and we have a common empathy.

When I met Kim Won-pil [in Pyongyang], he was a nineteen-year old boy with a mop of hair. Four years later, he had turned twenty-three. He did all kinds of odd jobs [in Busan], including waiting on tables in a house where meals were served. I ate food he brought back for me, and I sometimes ate rice he had scraped of the bottom of a pan. I did not ask him to work just so I would have something to eat. What I'm telling you is that we experienced all kinds of things. It was a very dramatic time of deep emotions.

The woman selling red bean porridge

I was working at pier number 4 in Choryang, in Busan-jin district. After getting off work I would go to the red bean porridge and rice-cake stalls. That still comes back to me. After work, I would receive my pay and it would be cold wherever I went, so I would go to a particular red bean porridge stall. When you come out of Choryang Station, you see many women working in stalls there. They would wrap their pots in a tattered blanket so the porridge didn't get cold, and serve it from the pot. I would just hold the pot in my arms. The woman never told me off for doing that. After I had talked to her for thirty minutes, she would offer me a bowl of porridge. After I had visited and talked with her for several days, she even entrusted me to take care of the money she had earned from selling the porridge.

There are still times when I crave a bowl of that porridge. It was so delicious at that time, perhaps because we were all hungry, but I believed it was the most delicious food in the world. I miss the face and the shape of the lady who sold it, whose thoughts were all about selling, even though she was stained with dirt. I still cannot forget how delicious the porridge served by her hands was.

Sometimes as a refugee, I used to sleep in a bomb shelter. There were no houses to be found then. It seems only yesterday that I climbed to a mountain ridge and slept with a jacket covering me. The home of the woman who sold the porridge was a very small room, where she lived with her husband and her children. When you saw her children, you could not help pitying them because they were in the most pitiable of conditions. Yet she had something to be proud of, for she had a place to call home. After she had ladled the porridge into a bowl, she would give me what was left at the bottom of the pot, and it was

delicious. What a memory that is!

Scavenging for food, this brother and sister fight for survival in a railroad yard in Seoul in November 1950

Train yourself to be independent

It was 1951; with a couple of followers, I had come south, walking the line between life and death. I wrote down the original Principle text. I remember writing it at the laborers' camp in Choryang district, in a room so small you could not lie down straight in it. You had to lie down diagonally, in a position something like an X, and still your feet touched the walls. It seems only yesterday that I lodged in that room, but a long time has passed.

During that time, I had to take care of all the problems that arise for a person wishing to live independently, such as financial problems, so I had to do all kinds of work. I had to act as the circumstances demanded, but I was more than equal to the tasks at hand. I had the capacity to adapt myself to the circumstances. Actually, I was not born like that; I trained myself. Unless one can train oneself to be an independent figure in any kind of environment, one can't possibly achieve such a great objective as those related to the providence.

In following this sacred life, this course of putting into practice the words I have spoken as a man, I have my own philosophy, calling for me to leave a record behind me and tread a unique, zigzagging path.

The pain of the refugee

Whenever I come to Busan, I always think of the Jagalchi Fish Market. When I was a refugee in a miserable state, I would wander around that area. What do you think was the wish of all the people who had come to Busan as refugees? Do you think there was even one person among them who did not want to return to his hometown?

Coming south where they had no roots and living among the South Koreans based here, the North Koreans too had to lay a foundation for their livelihood. That's refugee life. That is how one is meant to make a start and settle down. I too came down as a refugee and lived as a refugee. The ups and downs of that process were truly miserable. How miserable? More miserable than the life of any laborer, or even any prisoner, in South Korea. Refugees are in a position where they cannot return to their hometowns or introduce their hometowns to their children or grandchildren. How wretched is that?

Link to a well-researched article that describes Busan during the Korean War years.

January 1951: Life of Korean War Refugees in Busan

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Escorted by the military, refugees head south in hopes of finding a safe haven, carrying only basic possessions during the 1950-53 Korean War in this file photo. Busan, the nation's southernmost city, was crowded with approximately a half million refugees on top of its existing population in early 1951. / Korea Times File

By Andrei Lankov

Century of Turbulence (1884-Now) (5)

Professor Andrei Lankov
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In the center of Busan, not far away from a railway station, one can come across a group of very life-like sculptures. These are depictions of badly dressed people of both sexes, working some strange-looking pieces of equipment, moving heavy loads or just laying down on the streets. This is how the Busan municipal government decided to commemorate the life of the city in the early 1950s when it was home to a large refugee population.

Busan, the nation's southernmost city, acted as the "provisional capital" for the almost entire length of the Korean War.

On July 27, 1950, the ROK parliament met there, soon to be followed by other government institutions.

In October 1950, after Seoul was retaken by the U.N. forces, the government returned there for a while. However, a communist offensive in December 1950 made the South Korean government return to Busan and stay there until the cessation of hostilities.

Since 1950 60th ANNIVERSARY THE KOREA TIMES

In early 1951 Busan, the city with a pre-war population of some 882,000, was crowded with approximately half-a-million refugees.

A similar number found shelter in smaller cities along the southern coast, and so the total of refugees was estimated to be between four and six million.

While Busan is a relatively warm city (the air temperature seldom goes below the freezing point in winter), the refugees still had to be housed in permanent buildings.

The sudden arrival of such a large number of people put the local authorities in a difficult situation: all public buildings, including churches, school, industrial facilities, were emptied to serve as temporary shelters for the refugees. Still, a number of refugees froze to death in those winter months.

Busan had great difficulties in handling such a refugee population: Supplying the refugees' camps with drinkable water was a challenge, since the city's water supply system was designed in the 1930s to provide for the requirements of merely 300,000 inhabitants (the city's population in the 1930s).

To make things worse, this system, inadequate by 1950, had not been repaired for over a decade.

A large number of the able-bodied male refugees saw it as an employment opportunity and began to deliver water from distant pumps and wells to better-off houses, eateries and other places.

A water vendor, equipped with two large buckets, made of used oil drums, was a typical figure on the streets of war-time Busan.

The shortage of water also led to other dangers: Epidemics in crowded quarters were an ever present threat, and fires regularly devastated the refugees' camps.

Refugees who initially lived in tents and dugouts eventually began to establish more permanent shelters for themselves. They used any kind of material that was available.

Top 10 Stories

1 Yoon Suk-yeol wins presidential election
2 Angry voters turn out to vote against President Moon, ruling party
3 Yoon vows to open era of national unity
4 Yoon to scrap Moon's anti-nuclear policies
5 Yoon to redirect Korea's diplomacy with US, China, Japan
6 Uncompromising prosecutor's crusade to bring back justice
7 Market-driven economy to gain momentum under Yoon
8 Financial industry leaders call on Yoon to deregulate capital market
9 Yoon gov't to expand support for cultural creators
10 Decoding Yoon's upset win

Top 5 Entertainment & Arts News

1  French director mixes Korean, European cultures in film 'Vanishing'
2  Kim Jae-wook, Jung Soo-jung hope to offer hilarious rom-com with 'Crazy Love'
3  Filmmaker zooms in on Korea's 'spycam' epidemic, woeful state of women's rights
4  Jung Eun-ji to star in OCN's new mystery thriller
5  BTS to return for first Korean concerts in over two years

DARKROOM

Ukraine imposes state of emergency

By the end of the war, there were some 40,000 makeshift dwellings in Busan stitched together from corrugated iron, discarded planks and plywood.

The boxes for U.S. army rations provided one of the most common types of building material.

These houses were crowded to the extreme: Typically, a family of five-seven members lived in a dwelling of 10 square meters and greater densities were not unknown.

The refugees made their living by small commerce or by handicrafts, sometimes of very unconventional nature. Among other things, people gathered floating wood from the sea, dried it and then sold as firewood; collected old cans or drums and made them into pieces of metal which could be used for constructing the makeshift houses; gathered edible waste discarded near the military bases and used it to cook some dishes.

These dishes were sometimes called "U.N. stew," but more frequently were known as "kkulkkuli chuk," or "pigs' soup."

There were more conventional activities as well: People worked as porters and manual labourers of all kinds, ran food stalls and looked for jobs in still functioning industries. Jobs were difficult to come across, so every morning long queues grew in front of places where there was a chance of some casual work.

Employment at the U.S. military base was a dream for many, but it was quite difficult to secure.

It seems that violent crime and gangs, while present, did not constitute a serious problem in wartime cities, but petty theft became commonplace. (A popular saying in Seoul after the war was, "If you close your eyes, someone will steal your nose!")

People stole the cargo from passing trains, and the bravest risked their life in daring raids at the U.N. military facilities -- with pieces of coal or good metal being the major prizes. This was not easy, since the guards shot to kill and sometimes they did not miss. As one would expect, prostitution flourished in this environment, too.

Nonetheless, signs of the future could be seen amidst the dislocation and chaos. Schools continued to work, and among children of school age, nearly 70 percent attended primary school even in 1951, the most difficult of the war years.

Indeed, one of the most common memories of ordinary people from the war was the provisional schools, often operated under the open sky or inside a large army tent (when such a luxury was available).

Students sat on the ground while the teacher stood or sat in front of them.

The number of students in a "classroom" could be one hundred, with only one textbook for every five children. But they studied nonetheless, and their efforts were a sign of the post-war recovery, which is often described as a "miracle."

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