

Sara Day (2018 grad)

Hide-and-Seek

You could hear a pin drop. My teacher shuffled into class and could tell that my class was worn out from learning Korean that day—a task assigned to me after I enlisted in the Army to become a Cryptologic Linguist. Out of a team of eight Korean instructors that rotated hourly throughout the day, this teacher was most dear to my heart. He was old, with odd repetitive gestures and a sense of humor that was dark enough to make Morticia Addams cringe. He was supposed to teach us a new grammar pattern for the day, but instead he decided to tell us a story from his childhood. The story was about him and his older brother. The only thing that made his story different from the average nostalgic stories of the elderly? He was in North Korea—and he was on the run.

Pak Yong Bin was hiding in the bushes. This was no game. Korea was ensnared in a bloody war between what is now North and South Korea. His brother whispered to him and told him to keep quiet, because North Korean soldiers had almost spotted them. One of the officers was so close to the bush he was hiding in, Pak could reach out and touch his boot if he wanted to. He and his brother had lost track of the rest of their family and spent days hiking through the mountains of Korea to get further south. Their shoes and clothes were tattered, but they had persisted through the pain with the hopes of reuniting with their family once they reached safety. Now, those hopes were needed more than ever.

When he thought the officers had walked far enough for them to continue their escape, Pak's brother told him to run as fast as he could. He sprinted from the bush and ran the direction he hoped would be the right way. Unfortunately, one of the officers was closer than they had realized and pursued the young kids toward a cliff. With nowhere left to run, Pak's brother pushed him down the mountain. He slid down the side, hitting rocks and bushes on the way down, and scrambled to hide after he finally gained traction again. He waited for a long time for his brother to come get him, but he never returned. Pak finished his quest alone at only seven years old. The war ended, and he was safely in South Korea, but even after all these years, had not seen his family again.

My class and I were in awe of him. Although he liked to tell us stories of all kinds, he had never before mentioned his experience of the Korean war. This man was a walking piece of history. That hour of class was so moving, we talked to the teaching team leader about the things he told us and how much it affected us. The team leader told us that in the past he recorded Pak's stories of the Korean war amounting to almost 6 hours of narrative. I can only imagine the untold pieces of his childhood escape that we were unable to hear in a mere 50-minute class.

Professor Pak ignited a fire inside me that I thought was long snuffed out by the crushing amount of work we all had to do to complete the course. Before that point, Korea was an abstract country, and I was learning about it because I had to. Now, it was like a small window into the incredibly reclusive country of North Korea had opened, and I could *see* the people who live there and *feel* the desire to learn more. Knowledge is power, after all!

Now, I have dedicated my life to understanding and ultimately advising others about issues in North Korea pertaining to denuclearization. My experience with Professor Park is a priceless gem in my life that urged me to embrace a career related to North Korea. For me, North Korea is not just “enemy to the United States”. It is a battleground of potential for me to use my knowledge to help the people that live there while simultaneously assisting the United States in the mission to alleviate tensions between the United States and North Korea.