

**Interview with Mr. Yon-Jae Lee, Paris, January 28<sup>th</sup>, 2017 (translation from French)**  
**By Yoshimi Lee (present Hi-Jae Lee)**

-My name is Robert Lee, I Yon-Jae, Lee Ryusai. I am the second son of the Lee family and my name is Yon-Jae Lee.

*-Do you remember the house in Seoul?*

-Yes, vaguely it is a traditional Korean house with a garden that is surrounded by other houses, it was a fairly large house for the time I think.

I remember a burglary in this house and I remember that there were two or three policemen who came to see the damage and they searched around the wall outside of the yard.

Apart from that there was a small yard in the middle, in this garden there was a platform on which are placed the large vases of *kimchi*<sup>1</sup>. In general, they are stored in the basement. At the beginning of the occupation by the northern soldiers there were soldiers who came to requisition vegetables, rice etc. I remember that my grandmother had filled all the food and vegetables in small pots, small vases and soldiers looked at the two large vases and they left without anything because they thought there was nothing. So, it was the ruse of my grandma. Well apart from that, (...) the memory of the house (...), there was our family plus the grandmother I think, and maybe there was a helper as well.

The rooms were traditional rooms with underfloor heating, *ondol*<sup>2</sup>

Another memory of the house in Seoul is that I felt that there was something happening even being a kid, because one day suddenly there was another leader within the kids group, when we were playing with the kid's neighbors.

I think I followed a few months of kindergarten and suddenly there was someone else that we did not know who immediately became the head of the neighborhood children. It was certainly the son of a North Korean military officer.

I also remember that I was struck by the obligation that a family member, the head of the family had to go every day to a meeting by the occupying army at a given time of the day, so every night I believe or the end of the afternoon, there was someone from the family who was going to the meeting that was mandatory. So, this was very a marking event for a child.

I was 5.

Pépé (his father) went to hide, certainly he changed his position every day, he was wanted by the northern army because his elder brother was executed as he was a journalist and as his younger brother he was searched by the northern army.

*- And one day you decide to go to the pear farm.*

-Our father had a small pear farm and we had taken refuge for a short period of time. I do not remember how long we stayed in this house that was not far from our house in Seoul but on the way back home happened an incident: Our great cousin was caught, beaten by the soldiers of the north. And it happened that someone who came from this army checkpoint, this person

accompanied me back home by bike. That's why I came home before the rest of the family, my mother and then the brothers. When this man who accompanied me by bike left, I told my father what happened. And then, he went to the kitchen, he ate a large bowl of cold rice with some *Gochujang*<sup>3</sup>. He then came out searching for our great cousin. He then came back, I think the next day or the next day with the cousin.

At the farm, there were children from distant families or just children. We were playing in the fields in the woods; this is the first time I have ever seen a snake in my life.

Also, one evening I do not know exactly when, but maybe there was a guest, and for the meal there was chicken. The next day I found out that there was a chicken that was missing so I clearly understood that it was the chicken we had eaten.

Well, no more memories ...

I remember hearing the shot somewhere so it was a somewhat disturbing climate.

*-And after you return to Seoul*

-Seoul and then we head to the South. First thing is that I see my mother with my grandmother preparing a lot of rice in a saucepan and kimchi. Then we leave to the station; how I cannot remember.

But I remember one thing, that when we got into a wagon, it was a commercial wagon for goods or cattle; there were no seats, it was a bare wagon. And we got into it and I thought to myself why are we getting into a wagon? There were plenty of people, we just had room to lie down. I think when the train left it was already dark and the next morning the train stopped somewhere. So, we went down to relieve ourselves and on the way back to the wagon I saw that there were a lot of people on the roof. I remember how lucky we were, we were at least in the wagon! This is the memory that remains to me; the strongest memory of this exodus to the south.

And second thing is, before we arrived in Seoul (Pusan) we stopped for a while in a town, and we were to sleep for a while in a Chinese restaurant. There were few rooms on the first floor but these rooms were already occupied by other families who certainly fled from Seoul like us. This family had to agree to release a room for us. So, we spent some time there and I remember clearly from this moment the smell of *chahan*<sup>4</sup> which smelled a little bit special as there was definitely a special ingredient for this restaurant. For me, that is my "madeleine de Proust".

And then we went down to Seoul no, no, Pusan and I think we were greeted by the family of our Grandmother's brother, isn't it?

*-I do not know*

-If I remember certain events it was because it was something so special to me and for everyone, it was the occupation, it was the exodus, it is not something that we see frequently. I remember mostly the American military plane, although do not know what route this was for ... But I remember that the ground was metallic and there was a kind of ripple. It was a small military plane, there were people who were vomiting and not only because it was metal, but this extra thing (vomit) made everyone slip.

I know that to go to Japan we flew from Seoul to Tokyo, I have no special memory of that. We were welcomed into a Japanese family, it was a work relation from the bank where P  p   (his father) had worked.

I remember starting primary school while living in this house and shortly after we went to Kichijyoji. Maybe we lived there for 3 or 4 months in that family.

We spoke Korean, but after leaving Korea, as our parents were completely bilingual in Korean and Japanese, for us to feel integrated they talked to us only in Japanese from the beginning. I do know not even if they have noticed the risk that the children will forget the Korean language, I do not know if they thought about this thing (...) And maybe the parents were embarrassed to speak Korean in front of the Japanese and that's why we only spoke Japanese at home

*-But they decided to keep the Korean names*

-So Yes, there was a little paradox.

*-Do you feel Korean Japanese or zainichi<sup>5</sup>?*

-Closer to the Japanese, because I cannot feel Korean when I do not even speak Korean; so that's the fault of P  p   and M  m  .

I'm not *zainichi* either.

So, this is a rather unique case.

*-And where do you want to leave your ashes?*

-In Paris

*-That's where you lived the longest?*

*Do you think your mother would like to leave her ashes here (in Paris)? Where she was born (in Korea)?*

-Since she is in bed like that, the language she speaks naturally is Korean even though she is comfortable in both languages, but the first sentence she says is still Korean.

Maybe, yes but (...), well in Paris perhaps ...

1-kimchi (kor) : staple in Korean cuisine, fermented spicy vegetables

2-ondol (kor) : Korean traditional architecture, using underfloor heating

3-Gochujang (kor) : Korean red fermented chilly paste

4-chahan (jap) : Cantonese rice dish

5-zainichi (jap) : Korean residing in Japan