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Global Voices: Pleas for Korean peace 60 years after fighting ended

May 02, 2013 | By Carol J. Williams

A conference to promote peace between communist and capitalist adversaries might sound like an antiquated notion in the post-Cold War era.

But in this 60th anniversary year of the signing of the Korean War armistice, which suspended the fighting but never led to a peace treaty, tension has escalated to a frightening crescendo. In a bid to focus the world's attention on this unresolved crisis, Koreans from both sides of the U.S.-designated demilitarized zone will bring their stories of personal heartache to a three-day forum organized by the UCLA Center for Korean Studies.

Setting the stage for discussions on how to pursue a formal end to the conflict will be two documentary films, "Memory of Forgotten War" and "The Woman, the Orphan, and the Tiger," tracing the tragic fates of war survivors and families separated by the ideological cleaving of their homeland.

In "Memory of Forgotten War," Bay Area filmmaker Deann Borshay Liem and her Boston College professor brother-in-law, Ramsay Liem, weave an emotionally powerful tapestry of the post-war journeys of four Korean immigrants, their family photos, archival wartime footage and the Korean peninsula's 20th century history as pawn on the great powers' chessboard.

The enduring hardships of the frozen conflict are told through the aging survivors' experiences: Hee Bok Kim, separated from her Pyongyang family when she married and moved to Seoul just before the war; Suntae Chun, shunned among his South Korean colleagues for his family ties to the North; Kee Park, a daughter of the landed gentry dispossessed when the communists rolled over her home in Bukchang; Minyong Lee, who hid his northern connections from Seoul neighbors after a brother was beaten to death for having sided with the Soviet-backed North Korean government in the five years between World War II's end and the outbreak of a proxy superpower war in Korea.

The Liems discussed their film and their hopes for the May 8-10 UCLA conference in an interview with The Times.

Q: What did you hope to accomplish with the film?

Ramsay Liem: One purpose was to remind all Americans that the Korean War never ended. The fighting ended with a cease-fire in 1953, but it perpetually haunts us in our relations with North Korea. The film is very much an effort to convey the human legacies of the division that have continued on, long past the end of the hot war.

Q: Why is there still such strong social reproach among South Koreans over their countrymen's visits to relatives in North Korea?

Ramsay Liem: Divided families get caught between competing political agendas. Until the war is finally settled with a peace treaty, many tragic legacies are not going to be resolved, including those of the divided families. We still don't have an official policy or legislation in the United States to make it possible for Koreans in this country to meet their relatives in North Korea, although several thousand Korean Americans have been able to get there in their own particular ways.

Deann Borshay Liem: Minyong Lee expresses this most poignantly in the film, about how the politics are so black and white. If you have family members who voluntarily went to North Korea, the level of anti-communist sentiment is so strong that it's really hard for people to accept that. For him, it weighed on him even after he emigrated to the United States.

Q: Why, with the Cold War over, does the North-South divide on the Korean peninsula persist? What needs to change on each side of the demilitarized zone to reunite Koreans?

Ramsay Liem: One of the critical factors is the failure of signatories to the armistice -- including the United States and the People's Republic of China -- to move beyond the truce. Until that Cold War division is ended, and the only way to end it is to end the war, it will be impossible to create an environment where Koreans can go back and forth.

Deann Borshay Liem: Hee Bok Kim says we need to know more about North Korea before we judge it. Her experience and others who have reunited should guide us.

Q: Even among the few who have managed to make the journey to see family in the North, there have been many cases where it was too late, that most or all of their immediate family had died. Is there a risk that as the years go by and survivors die that there will be less a sense of urgency to heal the divide?

Ramsay Liem: There is always a danger that the further you get away from the reality of the war, and it's quite far already after 60 years, that it is quite difficult to make people aware of these continuing conditions.

Q: How important is it to expose the myths about why Korea is divided? As professor Bruce Cumings of the University of Chicago says in the film, most Americans don't know that it was the U.S. occupation force that drew the DMZ immediately after World War II, not the Koreans themselves.

Ramsay Liem: Without question, this lack of understanding of the history is a big piece of the problem. Most people assume that North Korean hostility and belligerence are at fault, that for some reason they want to attack us. The fact is that you can't understand why we have these moments of intense crisis with North Korea nowadays without going back and trying to understand the origins of this situation. Americans fought in this war, we were a major player, and that war has to be ended. It is my deepest conviction that North Koreans don't want this hostile relationship.

Deann Borshay Liem: Mainstream media portrayals of North Korea are very one-dimensional. News reports usually show pictures of people in military uniforms. You don't see the human beings there. This portrayal has created a moral and psychological distance from the country. This idea of learning more about the country before we create policies and make judgments is an important message in the film.

Q: How do North Koreans explain the vast development gap between their country and South Korea, where GDP is 40 times that of the North?

Ramsay Liem: In spite of everything said about how closed North Korea is, information does get in and out. Certainly members of the leadership are well aware of their economic conditions. Kim Jong Un has made it a priority, and he's said very publicly, that it's time to make living conditions for average North Koreans significantly better than they are or have been. It's not something they have denied. But having to invest so much of their limited resources in national security makes it incredibly difficult for them to move forward.

Q: What would have happened if the United States hadn't occupied the South and created the DMZ as a bulwark against further Soviet expansion? Would we have a united and independent Korea today that, like other Soviet satellites, might have broken free of communism after collapse of the Soviet Union?

Ramsay Liem: There are diverse views about the what-if scenarios. Some say there would have been intense civil conflict whether the Soviets and the United States got involved or not. No one thinks that the level of damage to the country would have come close to what happened during the Korean War, when one-tenth of the population was killed. But who knows what shape the country would have taken? I do think the country would have remained united; the only question is in what form. I'm confident they would have found their own path.

Q: How do you assess the chances for reunification of the Korean peninsula in your lifetimes?

Ramsay Liem: From my point of view, reunification is not an all-or-nothing outcome. It's a process. In thinking of my own lifetime and what remains of it, I am hopeful there will be progress, a return to negotiations, some willingness at the highest levels to meet. I hope there will be some move away from the intense hostility we've seen in the last several months.

Deann Borshay Liem: I'm not sure what will happen in my lifetime but I would like to see steps taken in that direction. In many ways our film represents the keeping of that hope alive that there will be peace.