

Duluth man knows joy of a reunion;

Separated families: Korean immigrant was one of the lucky few in 1987 to get into North Korea to visit aging relatives.

The Atlanta Journal and Constitution

August 17, 2000, Thursday,, Home Edition

Copyright 2000 The Atlanta Constitution

Section: News; Pg. 3B

Length: 574 words

Byline: Mark Bixler, Staff

Body

After he read the letter, Dong Suk Kim raced to the phone in his house in Duluth and called his brother in South Korea.

"Mother is alive!" he said. "Sister is alive!"

"What are you talking about?" his brother said. "Are you crazy?"

CONSTITUTION

"I got a letter from North Korea, from our sister!"

It was a turning point in the kind of long, sad story familiar to people in North and South Korea and Korean immigrants around the world. Millions of them have been separated from relatives since the Korean War cut off communication between North and South in the early 1950s. They have lived through a half-century of births, weddings and funerals and a million everyday dramas without knowing if some of their closest relatives were alive.

This week, though, the leaders of North and South Korea cracked open the locked door that is their border and let 200 people cross from one side to the other for reunions with long-lost relatives. Thousands more have applied for the state-sponsored visits, including several elderly immigrants in metro Atlanta.

For many, the next few years offer a last best hope of a reunion like the one Kim lucked into in 1987, when he became one of very few people to slip into North Korea to see aging parents and siblings. Kim, whose brother in South Korea has applied for the state-sponsored visit, said he sympathizes with people waiting for permission because he knows what they're going through.

In June 1950, when North Korea invaded South Korea, Kim was a 19-year-old bookkeeping student living with his family in the middle of the Korean Peninsula. Six months later, as Chinese troops marched toward his city, Kim left home by train while his parents stayed behind for fear they would otherwise lose their home and land.

It was a Wednesday morning in December 1950.

"My mother and father were crying. They thought I would be back in a month or two," Kim said.

Kim worked as a guard for a year and then became a rifleman in the South Korean army in 1952. He wanted to go home when the war ended in 1953, but he couldn't do that because peace negotiators had redrawn boundary lines

Duluth man knows joy of a reunion; Separated families: Korean immigrant was one of the lucky few in 1987 to get into North Korea to visit aging relatives.

and moved his hometown from South Korea to North Korea. The North clamped down on contact with the outside world, so Kim couldn't call, write or visit his parents, a sister and four nieces and nephews.

During the next 35 years, Kim got married, moved to the United States and raised three children, but he could not tell his mother she had a daughter-in-law and grandchildren. His mother, meanwhile, could not tell Kim that his father was dead --- until Kim stumbled upon a bridge to the past one Sunday afternoon in 1987.

Kim was at his church in Tucker that day when he met a missionary from his hometown who had visited North Korea. He gave the missionary names and descriptions of his family.

Six months later, the mailman delivered a one-page letter from his sister.

Kim flew to Beijing in 1987 and obtained a hard-to-get visa to visit North Korea --- almost impossible for South Korean citizens and unusual even for U. S. citizens such as Kim. A day or two later, Kim found himself face to face with a frail old woman on the floor of a spartan house.

He did not recognize his mother at first.

She had been 49 when he left home. Now she was 86.

"So you're alive?" she said, crying.

Kim knelt down and put his head in her lap. "I grabbed her and cried for many minutes. I couldn't say anything."

Graphic

Photo

Dong Suk Kim, sitting in his Duluth home Wednesday, shows a photograph of his mother, Kum Joo Kim, who lived in North Korea. He understands the excitement of this week's reunions because he left what is now North Korea in 1950 and didn't see his mother again until 1987. / LAURA NOEL / Staff

Classification

Language: ENGLISH

Subject: KOREAN WAR (89%); GRANDCHILDREN (78%); IMMIGRATION (75%); WAR & CONFLICT (75%); PEACE PROCESS (70%); WEDDINGS & ENGAGEMENTS (69%); AGING (66%); SENIOR CITIZENS (66%)

Company: NORTH & SOUTH RAILWAYS LTD (92%); NORTH & SOUTH RAILWAYS LTD (92%); NORTH & SOUTH RAILWAYS LTD (92%)

Geographic: ATLANTA, GA, USA (55%); GEORGIA, USA (70%); KOREA, REPUBLIC OF (96%); KOREA, DEMOCRATIC PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF (94%); CHINA (79%); UNITED STATES (79%)

Load-Date: August 17, 2000

Duluth man knows joy of a reunion; Separated families: Korean immigrant was one of the lucky few in 1987 to get into North Korea to visit aging relatives.

End of Document