

Moon Jae-in: From Geoje to Cheong Wa Dae

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The file photo taken on Dec. 19, 1950, shows refugees aboard fishing boats and a military ship being evacuated from Hungnam, North Korea. The parents of Moon Jae-in, the winner of the presidential election, were among some 100,000 refugees from the North who eventually settled in Busan and nearby Geoje Island. / Korea Times

By Ned Forney

Nearly 65 years ago, on Jan. 24, 1953, a young couple from Hamhung, North Korea, celebrated the birth of their first son. They had come to the South Korean island of Geoje as refugees during the war, and like thousands of others who had fled the fighting, they struggled to adjust to their new home in the South. Yet, despite their poverty and hardships, they were thankful for their newborn son — and their freedom.

Three years earlier, in late December 1950, the couple and their two-year-old



daughter joined tens of thousands of North Korean civilians at the port city of Hungnam and boarded ships for the South. Fleeing from the advancing Chinese army, these refugees had promised their families they would return in “three days,” or as soon as the Communists were defeated.

But this never happened. The Communists were never defeated, the couple never returned to North Korea, and many of the refugees never saw or heard from their families again.

The husband has since passed away. But yesterday the refugee couple’s son, Moon Jae-in, became the new president of the Republic of Korea.

As the only American to interview 30 former refugees from Hungnam, I have a great deal of respect and admiration for those who lived through the “refugee experience” of the Korean War. Like Moon’s parents and sister, these men, women and children spent days and sometimes weeks exposed to the bitter cold of one of the worst winters in decades before being rescued by U.S. Navy and Merchant Marine ships.

My grandfather, Colonel Edward H. Forney, USMC, was the evacuation control officer of the Hungnam Evacuation _ the largest U.S. military amphibious evacuation of civilians under combat conditions in U.S. history. I have spent nearly two years living in Seoul, researching and writing about him, his fellow U.S. and ROK soldiers, and the refugees, and during this time I have often reflected on the meaning of freedom for Koreans, Americans, and me.

With the world’s recent focus on the refugee crisis in Europe, more people are aware of the ongoing plight of refugee families. Over the coming days and weeks, as news outlets and social media sites cover South Korea’s newly elected president and his family background, Moon’s story will be a bright spot in an otherwise bleak picture of civilians fleeing war-torn countries.

In a remarkable testament to South Korea’s open and evolving democratic political system, the son of refugee parents, who as a young boy helped his mother sell coal to earn extra money for his family, has risen from a life of poverty to the highest elected office in his country.

More than ever, I am convinced that American, British, and ROK sacrifices made at Hungnam were not in vain. Their efforts to protect and rescue North Korean civilians have made a profound impact on Korean history and have helped create an environment where democracy and freedom flourish. Today, South Korea has a dynamic society and is an influential global player that has repeatedly shown its ability to overcome political and economic adversity.

Nearly 100,000 North Korean civilians were rescued from Hungnam during the 14-day operation, and it is estimated that over 1 million of their descendants now live in South Korea, the United States, and countries around the world. President Moon is one of them.

The next five years will undoubtedly bring new and unforeseen challenges to the people of South Korea, and as the new president takes the oath of office, people and governments around the world _ regardless of whether they agree or disagree with his political views _ will be wishing him well. But as many of his critics will quickly point out, with his rise from Geoje’s refugee camps to Cheong Wa Dae completed, the most important phase of Moon’s life is just beginning.

The writer is a grandson of the late Colonel Edward H. Forney, the evacuation control officer of the Hungnam Evacuation in December 1950. Ned Forney himself is a former captain in the USMC. He can be reached at ned.forney1985@gmail.com.



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