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Lee Hak Rae, the Korean Connection and "Japanese" War Crimes on the Burma-Thai Railway

Introduction by Utsumi Aiko

Translated by Herbert Bix

Lee Hak Rae was a Korean youth who went to work at age fifteen supervising prisoners of the Japanese mobilized to build the Burma-Thailand Railway. Hintok, where he served, was the most dangerous place along the railway. Prisoners called it "Hellfire Pass." Of approximately 700 Australians, 100 died there, mainly from overwork and diseases such as dysentery and cholera. Lee was indicted by an Australian court in Singapore on September 25, 1946, but on October 24 his case was dismissed. In Hong Kong, en route to Japan, he was again forced to return to Singapore. On March 10, 1947 he was indicted for a second time.

Lee Hak Rae (left) poses with other Korean civilian workers recruited by the Imperial Japanese Army to guard POWs forced to build the Burma-Thai railway in Thailand in 1942. Photo Courtesy of the History Museum of Japanese-Koreans.

The first of three charges lodged against Lee, whose Japanese name was Kakurai Hiromaru, was that he was neglectful of his duties in providing such things as food, medicine, and clothing at the Hintok camp; second, that he forced sick prisoners to go out on work details; and third that he physically assaulted prisoners. On March 20 Lee was condemned to death by hanging, but eight months later, on November 11, his sentence was reduced to twenty years imprisonment.

Regarding the first charge, Lee's lawyer argued as follows: how could the lowest ranking civilian employee in the service of the Japanese army--a gunzoku--be held accountable for the situation in a prisoner-of-war camp? Abe Hiroshi, a platoon leader in the Railway Corps, said that even when officers of the Railway Corps requested medicines, they were not taken seriously but told "There is no reason to give anything to prisoners." Clearly, a gunzoku serving in the army had neither the authority nor the power to improve conditions.

Second, the prison camp took its orders from the Railway Corps. However, because precedence was given to the construction orders of the Imperial Headquarters, the prison camp sent sick prisoners out to work. The problem was this: did responsibility lie with the Railway Corps that requested prison laborers or with the authorities in the prison camp who forced them to go? The Railway Corps made the request but the camp directly designated sick prisoners to work. Did the authority and responsibility for their dispatch rest with Lee Hak Rae? He argued that he had only sent prisoners out to work in accordance with orders.

The third charge, beating, Lee himself admitted. He said that he once struck an Australian prisoner who had violated regulations. The Japanese army did not court martial violators of discipline but dealt with them by face slapping. Beating without any cause was also an everyday occurrence within the Japanese army. This way of thinking differentiated the Japanese and Allied armies. Lee Hak Rae, whose training included being beaten, had a very shallow awareness of war crimes.

Lee's sentence was reduced from hanging to twenty years. Lt. Colonel Edward "Weary" Dunlop, the Australian military doctor who had bitterly confronted Lee at Hintok said that hanging was too severe, but that he should be punished for having driven sick prisoners out to work. Dunlop also said that he had "no feeling other than regret" for a person who, when he is suffering, takes it out by hitting someone else. Although Lee was one of the lowest ranking civilian employees in the Japanese army, prisoners believed he had the authority to compel work and he became an object of hatred.

The Japanese military drafted 240,000 Koreans to serve in the military and in subordinate capacities as civilians. Of these, 148 were convicted as B/C-class war criminals and 23 were hanged. The following two reports on the case of Lee Hak Rae and other Koreans who served Japan in the building of the Burma-Thai Railway raise important issues of war responsibility, human rights, and the nature of the Japanese imperial army posed by the B and C Class War Crimes Tribunals. These trials, which unfolded concurrently with the Tokyo trials, resulted in the conviction of thousands of low ranking Japanese soldiers and civilian personnel in direct interaction with allied POWs, as well as Korean personnel who faced charges by their former prisoners. While the high command for the most part was untouched, many of those with least authority were executed and others served long prison sentences.

We present two reports on the case of Lee Hak Rae and Koreans charged with B and C Class war crimes, and the reexamination of their responsibility in contemporary Japan and South Korea.

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Witness to War: A Spared Korean war criminal pursues redress

Nakamura Ikemi

Lee Hak Rae was stunned on March 20, 1947, when he stood in an Australian military court in Singapore and was sentenced to hang as a war criminal for the brutal treatment he was accused of inflicting on ailing Allied prisoners of war who were forced to build the infamous Death Railway to their last breath.

Lee had been specifically accused by nine ex-POWs of collaborating with the Japanese military in forcing sick prisoners to build the Burma-Thai railway until many died.

Lee had been a civilian worker recruited by the Imperial Japanese Army in Korea, which from 1910 to 1945 was under Japanese colonial rule.

"I had never expected to receive the death penalty. I couldn't understand what happened to me," Lee, 82, and now a South Korean resident of Japan, recalled. "When I was handcuffed and felt the metal's coldness, the reality sank in."

Spending eight months on death row in P Hall of Singapore's Changi Prison, Class-B/C war criminal Lee saw other war criminals hanged, including more than 10 Japanese and one Korean.

Lee in 2007 and in his youth

But then on Nov. 7, 1947, he was summoned by an Australian officer and told his sentence had been commuted to 20 years of hard labor.

The guilty verdict changed Lee's fate. After serving nine years as a war criminal — four years in the Singapore prison and another five years in Tokyo's Sugamo Prison — he devoted his life to supporting other Korean convicted war criminals and their families in their struggle to win an apology and redress from Japan.

During the war, Japan drafted about 240,000 Koreans to serve as "Japanese" soldiers or as civilian workers.

Of these Korean recruits, 148 were convicted as Class-B/C war criminals for war crimes and for abusing POWs, and 23 were hanged, according to research by Aiko Utsumi, a professor at Keisen University in Tokyo and an expert on Koreans convicted of war crimes at the International Military Tribunal for the Far East.

The government excluded Korean war criminals and their families from most of the financial support Japanese war criminals and their families were entitled to, on grounds of nationality.

When Japan signed the 1952 San Francisco Peace Treaty, restoring its sovereignty, Koreans were stripped of the Japanese citizenship they had been forced to adopt during Japan's colonial rule.

"Japan forced Koreans to participate in the war (as Japanese) but then refused to pay us compensation because (we were suddenly no longer Japanese citizens). That's irrational," said Lee, who now runs a taxi company in Tokyo. "The government's attitude is unforgivable."

Lee lived in a southwestern province of Korea until 1942, when, at age 17, he and some 3,000 other Koreans were recruited as civilians to guard Allied POWs in Southeast Asia as the prisoners were forced to build airstrips and railways for the Imperial army.

After two months of basic training at Busan, he was sent to Hintok, Thailand, and, with six other Koreans, guarded some 500 Australian, British and Dutch POWs constructing the 415-km Thai-Burma railway, which was made famous with the movie "The Bridge on the River Kwai."

Lee had to obey Japanese officers eager to build the railway as quickly as possible, and supply them with enough POWs for the construction. But most of the POWs were in a weakened state, many extremely sick, and thus not up to the task, putting the Korean guards in a dilemma, Lee said.

"We didn't know anything about human rights or the Geneva Conventions" stipulating the humane treatment of POWs, he claimed. "We didn't have the power (to resist the Japanese officers)."

The POWs' quarters were makeshift, rough and leaky. They were given little food, clothing or medicine, and many suffered malnutrition and debilitating diseases, including malaria, dysentery and cholera, Lee said, adding many of them died.

It is estimated that more than 10,000 POWs and tens of thousands of Asian laborers died building what became known as the Death Railway.

In 1991, Lee flew to Australia to attend a symposium on the war and meet up with one of the Australian POWs he once guarded in Thailand. The ex-prisoner didn't know Lee had been sentenced to hang for abusing POWs.

"I was still obsessed with the death sentence and my fellow countryman's execution (as a war criminal), so it wasn't easy for me to meet him. But I apologized to him as one of his abusers . . . we understood each other and reconciled," Lee said. "Looking back, I now think I did the right thing (in making the trip)."

When Japan surrendered, Lee thought he would finally be able to return to Korea. But he was soon arrested by the Allied forces for the deadly abuse of POWs, and subsequently sentenced to hang.

Lee remembers the last dinners held for his fellow condemned war criminals in Changi Prison's P Hall in 1947, before they were hanged.

They were served rice, miso soup and tempura. Although they were not allowed to drink, they talked about their loved ones, sang songs and danced for two hours.

The one Korean wished his fellow inmates all the best the next morning, and cried out "Independence banzai!" as he was hanged, Lee recalled.

"I was convicted of forcing sick POWs to work. But I just followed Japan's policy on the treatment of POWs," he said. "Some of my fellow countrymen were executed (as war criminals). My mission is to settle the score (with the Japanese government) for the deceased."

Lee was moved from Singapore to Sugamo Prison in 1951 and freed in 1956, but his ordeal, as that of other Koreans convicted of war crimes, continued.

They could not return to what had become South Korea not only because they were on probation, but also because those Koreans who served the Japanese military were branded as collaborators back home, Lee said, noting this stigma forced them to stay in Japan, where they had to endure strong discrimination.

"We had no acquaintances (in Japan). There was no place to go and no jobs were available. We were in severe distress," he said, noting tht the conditions led two of his fellow ex-convicts commit suicide and another two to suffer mental illness.

To change the situation, Lee formed the group Doshinkai in 1955 with 70 other South Koreans with similar experiences.

While demanding that the government equally support Koreans who had been convicted of war crimes and their families, the group set up a taxi company in Tokyo in 1960 to provide members with jobs and a guaranteed livelihood.

In 1991, the group sued the government, demanding an apology and redress. The Supreme Court rejected their claim, although it admitted the state failed to enact laws to help the plaintiffs.

Lee said the ruling shows the government has not looked squarely at the fact that Japan caused tremendous damage to many people during the war.

"I will continue our activities until the government shows sincere remorse. This problem will not end even after all of us die," Lee said. "The following generation will keep raising this issue.

This is a slightly abbreviated version of an article that appeared in The Japan Times on Saturday, Aug. 18, 2007.

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Koreans on the Thai-Burma Railroad and War Responsibility

Gil Hyeong-yun

Translated by Daniel Rakove

Lee Hak Rae

Lee Hak Rae was born in 1925, in Boseong, South Jeolla Province. He has two younger siblings. His father, a poor farmer, hoped to give him a modern education and so he was sent to elementary school, which he almost graduated. He could not even dream of advancing to secondary school. His first job was at a shipyard in Yeosu, and his second was at a lumberyard.

He applied for a job under a rich Japanese family that owned many fishing boats, for work as a household servant, then worked at the Boseong Post Office. Under the name given to him by the Japanese colonial government in Korea, Kakurai Hiromaru, he planned to order lecture transcripts from Waseda University and study on his own.

One day, however, he lost a registered envelope containing the gathered wages of one conscripted miner in Hokkaido. He paid the money from his own pocket and then quit post office work. It was the spring of 1942. One day, the local mayor summoned him. "They're hiring prison guards at a POW camp in Southeast Asia," the mayor told him, urging him to seek employment there. The contract was for two years, with a monthly salary of 50 Won. This would allow him to evade the conscription that was bound to take him away otherwise. Thus, his employment decision was made somewhere in the gray zone between individual volition and outside pressure. A few days later, he took the exam and passed.

In an interview with Hankyoreh 21 newsmagazine on February 27, Lee reflected upon that moment as one of the high points of his life. At the age of 15, he departed for Southeast Asia. Thus began the journey of Lee Hak-rae, one that would lead to his receiving a death sentence in an Australian military tribunal for abuse of Allied prisoners.

His death sentence having been commuted, Lee is now over 80 years old and back in South Korea. He reflects on his death sentence as being "unjust." Though there have been calls to grant some mercy to those Korean class B and C war criminals who were conscripted under the Japanese, there has yet to be any in-depth discussion of the trials through which they were sentenced. With the help of the Republic of Korea's Truth Commission on Forced Mobilization Under Japanese Imperialism, Hankyoreh 21 procured and analyzed the trial transcripts of Korean class B and C war criminals. The Truth Commission is charged with researching the trial documents for those Korean "war criminals" punished in England, the Netherlands, the U.S., and China in order to shed light on the subject.

Lee was tried twice by military tribunal. The original charges against him for prisoner abuse were dropped when the 1st Australian War Crimes Section found his role insufficiently important to warrant punishment. Thus he boarded a homebound ship, but was arrested once more in Hong Kong, when the vessel docked for fuel. At his second trial, he was given a death sentence, which was subsequently reduced to a 20-year term. The official court document from his second trial, procured by Hankyoreh 21, is entitled "War Crimes Proceeding of Military Tribunal: Korean Guard Hiromura Kakurai."

The tribunal records are comprised of a summary of the court martial proceedings, a recommendation for a reduced sentence made by the Australian Army's legal affairs department, a transcript of the proceedings, and the testimonies of POWs. The trial was held in Singapore, from 18 to 20 March 1947. Lee was accused of crimes against humanity that occurred while he was overseeing the construction by forced laborers of a railroad at Hintok connecting Siam (Thailand) and Burma (Myanmar).

"I cannot deny that the prisoner camp conditions were deplorable," said Lee. Food, medicine, and clothes were not properly provided, and many forced laborers lost their lives due to wounds and diseases that went untreated. In the month of March 1943 alone, a full quarter of the 800 Australian prisoners were hospitalized. One hundred died. For good reason, the Australian military prosecutors could not forgive the Japanese for putting their men through hell on Earth. They were eager to pursue those responsible for the deaths of their comrades, but in their fury were not about to lend an ear to the plight of a youth caught up in the gears of the imperial war machine.

Lee supervised the prisoners at Hintok. As a civilian hired by the Japanese military, he was lower on the chain of command than a private. However in the trial proceedings, he was somehow transformed into the "Camp Commandant." The reason for this was that the military prosecutors took the testimony of the prisoners at their word, without an objective investigation into the situation. Most of the Australian prisoners did not know Lee's Japanese name. Instead, they gave the various guards nicknames, which in the case of Lee was "lizard." The origin of this name is unknown.

It is surmised that the testimonies of imprisoned officers Richard Allen and Reginald Houston played a key role. They stated that Lee was the officer in charge of the prison labor camp. Perhaps with some unease, the prosecutor admitted there was uncertainty regarding Lee's official position, but that in actuality he had assumed the position of officer in charge.

According to testimonies of prisoners at the time, Lee was often at odds with the Australian army surgeon and Lieutenant Colonel E. E. Dunlop as he tried to meet the demands of the Japanese engineer corps to deploy laborers. Dunlop insisted that wounded soldiers not be used. The prisoners soon developed an animosity

toward the Koreans directly overseeing them. Soldier Austin Pipe recounted that "lizard" was responsible for sending prisoners to work on the railroad, and some recalled that Lee had assaulted Dunlop. But other prisoners, such as Captain Richard Allen, testified that he could not recall Dunlop ever having been attacked by Lee, and that Lee was less brutal than the other guards. However, the vast majority of the testimony was unfavorable toward Lee. In order to sort out the war criminals, Australian investigators took pictures of the prison guards and showed them to the POWs. Those suspected of war crimes were then arrested and put on trial. There were no cross-examinations. Lee admitted to slapping those who disobeyed the rules, but denied taking any other harsh measures. It was difficult for the Australians to gauge just exactly how much authority was granted to the Korean youth.

Lee was 20 years old when he was put on trial, and fearful of what lay before him. He feigned ignorance before the judge, and damaged his credibility by insisting that daily labor was limited to five-and-a-half hours. Though his lawyer insisted the charges be dismissed on account of his not being Japanese, the judge rejected this argument - also backed up by the testimony of a Japanese colonel named Ishi - that as a Korean civilian, Lee's actions were merely the product of his Japanese superiors' wishes.

"I went to Southeast Asia in a situation of duress and was given 35 Yen a month," said Lee as he concluded his testimony, fighting back tears.

The verdict was delivered: " Kakurai Hiromura, please rise. The Court sentences you to death by hanging."

The circumstances were similar for other Koreans convicted of being war criminals. Jo Mun-sang was convicted by Australian officials at a courtroom in Sumatra and was hung.

Jo was born in 1921 to an elite family in Kaeseong and attended Gyeongseong Imperial University in Seoul. He served as a translator between the Japanese soldiers and the English-speaking POWs. As Jo was a devout Christian, the prosecutor posited that it would have been right to display compassion toward the weak in accordance with Christian doctrine. To this, Jo replied that the military left no room for individual conscience or religious faith. The written testimony submitted to the court on his behalf acknowledged having committed heinous acts. This testimony was written by an English officer, and strayed from Jo's actual words. He signed the document, however, believing it an accurate translation of his statements.

Park Jeong-gun, a native of Yeongil in North Gyeongsang Province, was nicknamed "Arry" from his Japanese name, Arai Hideo. He had been a member of the boxing club at Nihon University in Osaka. POWs testified that "Arry" would punch those working under him on the Burma-Thai Railway. When the Australian prosecutor asked if he truly had committed such acts, Park responded that he did not beat weak prisoners. Park testified that there were many prison guards named Arai, but to no avail. He received a sentence of 20 years. At this point, there is no way of verifying whether it was he or a different Arai who beat the prisoners.

Born in Kaeseong, Gyeonggi Province, Kim Jong Yeon's Japanese name under Korea's occupation was Kanemiya Shoren. His trial lasted from 4 August until September of 1948. His nickname was "Snake eye," and indeed, his picture found among the trial documents reveals a pair of serpentine eyes. NCO E. T. Nell testified that Kim was more brutal than the other guards, testimony that earned him a 12-year prison term.

Though he had never learned English, Lee Hak Rae knew enough to figure out what "death by hanging" meant. The instant he received his sentence, his vision went black and he felt all energy slip from his body. After receiving his sentence, Lee was moved to a cell in P-Hall at a prison in Singapore. For the next eight months, he watched as soldiers and servicemen of the old Japanese empire were taken off one by one off to the gallows. (For most, the waiting time before execution was 3 months.) "In the end, only Lim Yeong-jun and I were left. Before long, it was only myself. [Lim was executed 18 June 1947.] But look at me, I'm still alive to this day."

An argument between Lee's lawyer and the Australian prosecutors delayed his execution. As the war tribunal generally did not allow for appeals, Lee's lawyer had to file a petition and have it confirmed by the court. His lawyer referenced the fact that the same charges against Lee had previously been dismissed, and the Australian judge could not help but recognize this. The judge thus commuted Lee's sentence to a prison sentence commensurate to that of others convicted on similar charges. The final verdict came on October 20, 1947, and Lee was notified two weeks afterwards, on November 7, that he would live.

There were few who welcomed him upon his release. His homeland viewed him with suspicion as a pro-Japanese collaborator, and the Japanese ostracized him for his Korean ethnicity. Thus, his struggle continues to this day. "If only for the sake of my fallen comrades," he said, "I hope that our honor will one day be restored." Beneath the sunlit sky, his Jeolla Province accent was as distinct as ever.

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