

Former Chairman Park No-hak, pioneer in Sakhalin compatriots' repatriation movement

Led repatriation movement in Japan; through 'Park No-hak Register' raised awareness of the presence of around 7,000 Sakhalin compatriots
Leading exchanges through letter brokering and family reunions; laying foundation for institutionalizing permanent repatriation

The Overseas Koreans Agency (Commissioner Lee Sang-duk) has selected Park No-hak (1914-1988), former president of the Return of Detained Sakhalin Koreans Association, as its July Overseas Korean of the Month. He spearheaded the repatriation movement for Sakhalin Koreans and dedicated himself to achieving reunions of separated families.

Born in 1914 in Chungju, North Chungcheong Province, Park was forcibly mobilized to Sakhalin in 1943 during the Japanese colonial period. Even after liberation in 1945, he remained detained there and was stateless. He then married a Japanese woman and returned to Japan in 1958, where he dedicated his life to raising awareness of the presence of Sakhalin Koreans and to the movement for their return to their homeland.

'Hope of a single letter'; opening the door to reunions of separated families

After settling in Japan, Park established the Return of Detained Hwa-tae (Sakhalin) Koreans Association, a repatriation advocacy group, at his one-room office. Using money earned from manual labor, he drafted petitions and submitted them to relevant organizations in Korea and Japan, actively engaging in the repatriation movement for Sakhalin compatriots.

He volunteered to act as a "postman," delivering letters written from Sakhalin to families in Korea for those who had been cut off from contact for years.

At the time, Korea and the former Soviet Union did not have diplomatic relations, making postal correspondence impossible. Therefore, former Chairman Park received letters from Sakhalin Koreans in Japan, and forwarded them to his eldest son, Park Chang-gyu, who lived in Korea, to deliver them to their families. Each of these letters, containing confirmation of life or death, updates on family members and hopes for their return, was a miraculous message.

The postman for Sakhalin Koreans

As word spread among Sakhalin Koreans to "Ask Park No-hak



Park No-hak, former president of the Return of Detained Sakhalin Koreans Association

and he will find your family," the number of letters rapidly increased. Over 30 years, the former Chairman Park and his son delivered over 30,000 letters.

Former Chairman Park also created the "Park No-hak Register," which recorded the nationality, region and desired return status of Sakhalin Koreans, beginning in the mid-1960s.

This register, which included approximately 7,000 names, was the first official record of Sakhalin Koreans' desire to return and served as crucial evidence in diplomatic negotiations among South Korea, Japan and the former Soviet Union regarding Sakhalin Koreans.

Furthermore, this register became a historical document that brought the existence of Sakhalin Koreans to light and served as a standard for prioritizing and verifying those eligible for permanent repatriation.

'A lifelong dedication to reuniting separated families'

Facing difficulties in repatriating Koreans from Sakhalin, he spared no effort in various ways, including requesting cooperation from Japanese politicians and other figures to facilitate reunions with their families in their homeland.

Working with Japanese politicians and others, he persuaded the former Soviet authorities and facilitated the first visit to Japan and family reunions for 10 Koreans from Sakhalin in 1984. This marked the first official departure of Koreans from Sakhalin since the war, sparking the beginning of the repatriation movement.

Awarded Dongbaek Medal of Order of Civil Merit by gov't in 1988

Park personally selected invitees, arranged accommodations and provided interpretation services. His small "tatami" room became a tearful reunion space for separated families.

Later, considering the difficulties faced by families in Korea in reaching Japan, he proposed a reunion system where Koreans in Sakhalin would visit their homeland via Japan. In June 1988, a Japanese parliamentary delegation visited the former Soviet Union and requested this arrangement, and in September of that year, the first family reunions via Japan took place.

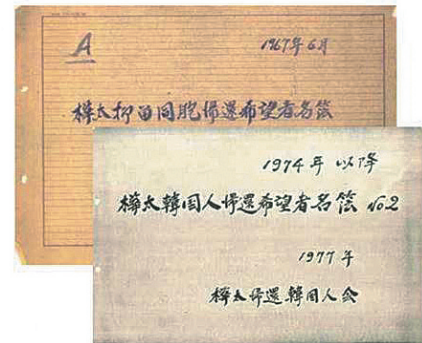
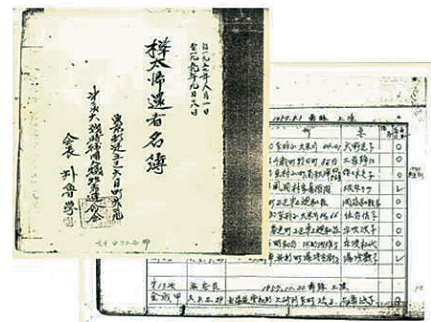
His efforts paid off, leading to the current Korean government's "Permanent Repatriation of Sakhalin Koreans Project," which continues to this day. In recognition of his contributions, the Korean government awarded him the Dongbaek Medal of the Order of Civil Merit in 1988.

Park No-hak's room, the place of a tearful reunion

"Former Chairman Park No-hak was a true pioneer who brought awareness to the world of the existence of Koreans in Sakhalin who were forcibly taken away during the Japanese colonial period and never returned, and he comforted those who suffered during colonial rule and the Cold War," OKA Commissioner Lee Sang-duk said. "To honor his life, which left a mark on the history of Koreans in

Sakhalin, we are selecting him as the Overseas Korean of the Month."

The OKA identifies and announces a Korean compatriot who has contributed to the development of the Republic of Korea or to the advancement of the status of Koreans in their countries of residence as the Overseas Korean of the Month (March - Kim Pyeong-jin (1926-2007), former president of the Jeju Development Association in Japan; April - Hong Myeong-gi (1934-2021), former chairman of the M&L Hong Foundation; May - Im Cheon-taek (1903-1985), independence activist; June - Park Byeong-heon (1928-2011), former head of the Korean Residents Union in Japan). [장]



A list of those seeking repatriation compiled by Park No-hak (provided by the National Archives of Korea)



Letters and lists sent to Park No-hak by Sakhalin compatriots (provided by the National Archives of Korea)