

Mother and daughter embrace after 8 years; ‘Let’s see each other often while we’re alive’

After 5 years of suspended flights, second- and third-generation Sakhalin compatriots return to homeland with support from Ministry of Unification
Overcoming pain of separation, tearful reunion with parents who have returned to live in Korea; late homecoming, brief reunion, then parting once more



Jang Lyubov (R) arrives at Incheon International Airport.

The early winter sun slanted through a long-term rental apartment in Jinjeop-eup, Namyangju, Gyeonggi Province, on the afternoon of Nov. 1. When this reporter pressed the doorbell, the door opened with a bright voice from beyond. Grandmother Kim Soon-ja (80), her husband Kim Hyeon-seon (93) and their daughter Jang Lyubov (59) welcomed us warmly.

This 66-square-meter home, neither cramped nor spacious, was provided by the government to Sakhalin Koreans who have returned permanently to Korea. For some, this house marks the end of their journey to settle down; for others, it remains a “homeland” still hard to reach.

The mother and daughter reunited on Oct. 30 after eight years apart. They say that as soon as Jang opened the front door and stepped inside, grandma Kim embraced her daughter and burst into tears she had been holding back.

When asked about her feelings at that moment, grandma Kim replied, “What words are needed? It’s just pure joy,” her face breaking into a bright, girlish smile, while her eyes reflected a mixture of yearning and happiness.

As lunchtime arrived, the table was set with dishes from both Korea and Sakhalin. Korean foods prepared by grandma Kim -- kimchi, spinach and “tteokgalbi” -- were served alongside salmon

roe, salted shrimp and sausage brought by her daughter from Russia. Korean and Russian words flowed freely among the three seated around the table, laughter spilling out. After the meal, Russian raspberry tea was served with chocolate and cookies for dessert.

Forty second- and third-generation Sakhalin Koreans, including Jang, visited their homeland at the invitation of the Overseas Koreans Agency and the Korean Red Cross. The purpose was to meet their first-generation parents and grandparents who had permanently returned to Korea but found it difficult to visit Sakhalin due to old age and health issues.

The “support project for second- and third-generation Sakhalin compatriots’ homeland visitation” began in 2017 but was suspended for five years due to the COVID-19 pandemic in 2019 and the Russia-Ukraine war in 2022. It has now resumed after five years. However, the journey without a direct flight was long and arduous. Jang flew for over a day from Sakhalin via Vladivostok and Shanghai. “It used to be just three hours,” grandma Kim said wistfully. “I really hope the direct flights come back soon.”

Approximately 26,000 Koreans live in Sakhalin, either forcibly relocated there during the Japanese colonial period or born locally. After the Russo-Japanese War in 1905, Japan occupied Sakhalin Island, rich in coal and timber. In 1938, under the National Mobilization Order, young Korean men were taken to coal mines and logging sites.

Direct flight route severed; 3 hours became 24 hours

Grandfather Kim’s family was also forcibly relocated from Samcheok, Gangwon Province, to Hokkaido, Japan, and then to the coal mines of Sakhalin. Even after Japan’s defeat in 1945, the tragedy did not end. The 1946 U.S.-Soviet Agreement limited repatriation to “Japanese nationals,” excluding Koreans. They were forced to live their entire lives as “stateless persons.”

‘All the Japanese left, but we had nowhere to go’

Grandma Kim lost her father in 1968, and her homeland remained only a memory of her hometown.



Grandma Kim Soon-ja (L); her husband, Kim Hyeon-seon (R); and daughter Jang Lyubov reunite after eight years.

In 1992, invited by the Korean Red Cross, she first set foot on Korean soil and visited her father's hometown, Goesan in North Chungcheong Province. During the Japanese occupation, the family was left behind in Goesan, while only her father departed for Sakhalin, and grandma Kim was born in Sakhalin.

She spent tender moments hiking Mount Songni with her older brother and sisters, but when she returned in 2010, she had lost contact with her sisters, and her brother, suffering from dementia, no longer recognized her.

'We met again after all these years, but he didn't even recognize me'

Although the Special Act on Support for Sakhalin Compatriots allowed first-generation permanent repatriation starting in 1992, second and third generations were excluded, forcing families to endure separation once more. Currently, about 300 first-generation compatriots remain in Sakhalin, while over 3,000 have repatriated permanently to date. Grandma Kim has lived here with her husband for 15 years. The Korean Red Cross covers the full rent, and utility bills are discounted.

"We each receive 500,000 won in basic support, totaling 1 million won for living expenses. Thanks to medical insurance benefits, we pay almost nothing for hospital bills and medication. The parks and walking paths are well-maintained, making it easy to manage our health. I can't express how grateful I am."

Memories of Sakhalin; Joseon people who lost their nationality

Grandpa Kim learned Japanese during the Japanese colonial period and received Korean language education from people who came from North Korea after the Soviet occupation. He later majored in mathematics and physics at a Russian university, worked as a researcher at a seismic research institute and also lectured at the university. After returning to Korea permanently, he



Photos of grandma Kim and her husband from their youth are seen alongside the South Korean and Russian flags.

also gave special lectures on earthquakes and tsunamis at Seoul National University.

After losing her first husband, grandma Kim raised cattle in Sakhalin and ran a tailor shop. She was resolute in sending all four daughters to university. She remarried after her children grew up.

"You have to educate them properly so they don't become fools. My eldest and second daughters graduated from teaching colleges and now teach English, and my youngest daughter got a job at a mobile phone company."

Jang, now a grandmother of four, carries the bitter wounds of returning to Sakhalin after facing neglect and discrimination while working at a Korean restaurant. Still, she expressed pride in Korea's economic development and the "hallyu" wave, saying, "Now that it's a country recognized by the world, I feel proud."

Grandma Kim's granddaughter's wedding photo was stuck on the refrigerator. "My granddaughter got married on Oct. 10, which was also my wedding anniversary, but I couldn't even go and only saw it in photos."

"I feel the absence of my parents during holidays," Jang said. "They're getting old and need someone to take care of them, so I also think about wanting to live here with my mother."

However, the language and adaptation barriers are high for her to settle in Korea as she is not fluent in Korean. Moreover, there are practical difficulties due to her children and grandchildren living in Russia. Grandma Kim is well aware of this reality.

"The children studied and worked in Russian schools and couldn't learn Korean. Coming to live in Korea is also hard work," she said.

For the next two weeks until her return to Russia on Nov. 12, the mother and daughter plan to make up for lost time together, going to the market and taking walks. Grandma Kim held her daughter's hand and said: "Let's see each other often while we're still alive. Now that we're old, we don't have many days left to meet."

In one corner of the living room, a photo from 60 years ago stood out, displayed alongside the South Korean and Russian flags.

"I'm wearing the clothes I bought after working for a month on a farm when I was 19," she explained.

Also on display was a photo of the couple riding a pony on Jeju Island eight years ago. Though they lamented growing old, their eyes still sparkled with a love for life. 🇰🇷🇷🇺