

LOST NAMES

by

RICHARD E. KIM

Richard E. Kim was born in Korea in 1932, immigrated to the United States after World War II ended, and lives in Massachusetts. He has taught at various universities, including the University of Massachusetts and San Diego State University. The book from which this excerpt is taken, Lost Names, is subtitled Scenes from a Korean Boyhood. It was published in 1970. This excerpt describes an incident during the Japanese invasion and occupation of Korea in World War II (1939-45), when the Japanese took over the schools and language instruction and insisted on the local residents adopting Japanese names.

P1 When I arrive at the school, our teacher is already in our classroom. He is a young Japanese, a recent graduate of a college in Tokyo. He is twenty-four years old, soft-spoken, and rather gentle with the children. He is lean, in fact, so lean that we give him a nickname the moment he is assigned to our class: Chopstick. Always pale-faced and looking in poor health, he likes to recite Japanese poetry in class, though we hardly understand it.

P2 I set about making the fire in the stove, with the help of several of my friends, who will later toss a coin to see who gets the "second place". The air in the classroom is freezing and, through my cotton socks, I can feel the icy chill of the wooden floor. It is unusual for our teacher to be in the classroom before the bell rings, so all the children are silent, hunched over their desks, rubbing their feet furtively to keep them warm. The teacher is sitting on his chair, behind the lectern on the platform, quietly looking at us. When I have the fire going at last, I shovel in some coal on top of the pine cones crackling inside the blazing stove. The stove sits in the middle of a square, tin floorboard in the center of the class. It is like a small island. I sit at a desk next to it, checking it regularly or adding more water to a tea kettle sizzling on top of it.

P3 The bell rings, and we sit up straight, hushed.

P4 The teacher stands up, looking at a piece of paper in his bony hand. He keeps silent for a long time, looking out the windows. It is almost like a blizzard outside -- the wind roaring and howling, the snow whipping down, slanting at nearly a forty-five-degree angle. The snow is so heavy and thick that I can barely make out the other buildings across the frozen pond.

(5) "Well," he says.

6 And I bid the children rise from their chairs, and, when they do, I command them to bow

to our teacher. We all bow our heads to him; then we sit down.

7 "Today," he says, without looking at us, holding up the piece of paper in front of him, "I must have your new names. I have the new names of most of you in this class, but the principal tells me that some of you have not yet registered your names. I shall call your old names, and those who are called will be excused from the class immediately, so that they can go home and return with their new names, which have been properly registered with the proper authorities in town. Do you understand what I am saying?"

8 Without waiting for our reaction, and still without looking at us, he calls out several names. My name is called.

9 "You may be excused," he says, crunching the piece of paper into a ball in his fist. "Report back as soon as you can."

(10) He gets down from the platform and says, "The rest of you will remain quiet and go over your homework." With that announcement, he abruptly turns away from us and walks out of the room.

11 I put my shoes on outside the classroom and, brushing aside the questions from the bewildered children, I start running away from the school as fast as I can in the blinding snow and choking, icy wind, running and skidding and stumbling in the deep snow. My new name, my old name, my true name, my not-true name? I am plunging and slogging through the snow, thinking, "I am going to lose my name; I am going to lose my name; we are all going to lose our names."...

12 My grandmother says, "Leave the boy home. He will catch cold."

13 My father says, "No, mother. I want him to come with me. I want him to see it and remember it." My father is wearing a Korean man's clothes: white pantaloons-like trousers, with the bottoms tied around his ankles, a long-sleeved white jacket, a blue vest, and a gray topcoat. My father is seldom seen in our native clothes, except when he has to attend a wedding or a funeral. He is wearing a black armband on the left sleeve of his gray topcoat. He is not wearing a hat.

14 "Have some hot soup before you go," says my grandmother.

(15) "No, thank you, mother," says my father, holding my hand. "Stay with Father and keep an eye on him."

16 My grandmother nods. "It is the end of the world," she mutters angrily. "Damn them! Damn them!"

17 "Come on," says my father to me.

Outside, by the west gate, four of my father's friends are waiting for us. They are dressed like my father -- all wearing black armbands on the left sleeves of their gray topcoats. I bow to them, but no one says a word either to me or to anyone else. On the small stone bridge outside the gate, they pause for a moment, whispering among themselves. The stream is frozen and covered thick with snow. Passers-by bow to the group. The four men -- my father's friends -- are the bookstore owner, an elder of our Presbyterian church, a doctor, and a farmer who also has an apple orchard. The snow is slashing down on us, and my ears are cold, even with ear muffs on. Snowflakes get inside my collar, making me shiver. We walk down the street; my father is in the middle of the group, holding my hand. I slip on an icy patch and stumble, and the bookstore owner helps me up and holds my hand. In the snow-covered open-air market place, which is closed down during the winter, the wind howls even more strongly, shrieking through the electric wires and telephone poles. The snow is beating down so hard that I have to bow my head and face sideways, but the men are walking straight up, occasionally returning, in silence, the bows from the other men on the street. We go past the town hall, past the Japanese department store and shops, and through the main street, where most of the shops are -- the bakery, the barber shop, the watch shop, the restaurant, the clothing store, the bicycle shop, the grain store, the pharmacy, the doctor's office, the dentist's office, the hardware store, the bank, the grocery store -- some bowing to us, some waving at us -- and, as we continue down the main street, we are followed by other people, and more and more people join us as we come near the end of the main street. My father and the bookstore owner are still holding my hands and I have to try hard to keep up with the men, though they are walking very slowly. At the end of the main street, we come to an intersection and turn to the right. It is an uphill road, and the snow-laden wind whips down from the top of the hill, almost blowing me off my feet, and I feel the men's hands tighten their grips on mine. At the top of the hill, there is a small Methodist church and, across from it, the police station. We struggle up the snow-packed hill, by the long stone wall of the police station, and enter its main gate. Inside, on the station grounds, in the deep snow, a long line of people barely moves along. We walk over the crackling snow and stand at the end of the line. We exchange bows with the people standing in line. No one says anything-- I, my father, the bookstore owner, the doctor, the farmer, the elder of our church, and all those people who have preceded or followed us ...

I am freezing with cold. I stamp my feet, crushing the icy snow on the ground. Without a word, the bookstore owner opens the front of his topcoat and pulls me inside and covers me up, except for my face, which is snuggled against the back of my father. He turns, looks at me, and fixes my ear muffs. He neither says a word to me nor smiles at me. I know when to keep quiet.

----- Excerpt 1 ends-----

(20) The line, hardly advancing, gets longer and longer. New people are lined up even outside the station grounds.

21 Someone comes to us. Someone from the front of the line. He is a young Korean man. He bows to my father. "Please, sir," he says, "come and take my place."

22 My father shakes his head. "I will wait for my turn here. Thank you anyway."

23 He stands silent for a moment.

24 "It's all right," my father says. "Go back to your place."

(25) He bows to my father once more and says, before he returns to the front of the line, "I am dying of shame, sir"; then, his words nearly lost in the howling snow, "I don't know what I can do."

26 A little while later, a Japanese policeman comes towards us. When he comes near to us, I can tell that he is an inspector. He is wearing a black cape. I see his long saber peering out of the bottom of his cape. I can hear the clank the saber makes against his black leather riding boots. He salutes my father. He has a long turned-up mustache. "It is an honor," he says to my father, "to see you in person here. You could have sent one of your servants."

27 My father is silent.

28 "Please come with me," says the Inspector. "I can't have you lined up out here like a common person. Please."

29 "I'll wait for my turn, just like everyone else," says my father. "They have been here longer than I have."

(30) "Come with me," insists the Inspector. "Please."

Afraid and, to my shame, trembling, I look up at my father.

My father looks at the Inspector and then at his friends.

Other people are watching us.

I feel the hands of the bookstore owner tighten on my shoulders.

(35) "If you insist," says my father.

The Inspector looks down at me. "You must be freezing," he says. His white-gloved hand reaches out for my snow-covered hair.

I duck my head inside the topcoat of the bookstore owner.

"Bring the boy with you, by all means," says the Inspector.

I hear my father's boots crunching on the snow. I free myself out of the bookstore owner's hands and nearly bump into the back of my father.

(40) He takes my hand. "Come with me."

The Inspector walks beside my father. His black cape is billowing in the wind and snow, flapping and flapping -- and his saber jingling and clanking. We walk toward the front door of

the granite station building. As we pass by the people in the line, they bow to my father silently. My father's head is bowed, and, without looking at the people, he goes slowly, holding my hand.

42 The Inspector opens the front door and holds it for us. A Korean detective inside the building quickly bows to my father. "You really didn't have to come in person, sir," he says in Korean. "I would have been glad to have registered your new name for you if I had known you were coming in person. In this cold."

43 We are inside the station. Other people in the line are admitted inside one at a time. The air is steamy and warm. The hallway is swarming with black-uniformed policemen, all wearing sabers. The wooden floor is slushy with melting snow.

44 The Inspector ushers us into a large room immediately to the right of the hallway by the door. There are two big tables, each with a policeman sitting behind. At each table, by the side of the Japanese policeman, a Korean detective sits on a chair, apparently interpreting for those Koreans who cannot understand Japanese.

(45) The Korean detective who met us at the door brings a chair from the back of the room. He offers it to my father.

My father does not sit down.

The Inspector tells the detective to bring some tea.

One of the men sitting at one of the tables facing the Japanese policeman cannot speak Japanese and has to have the words interpreted. The man is old; he helps out in the open-air market place on market days, doing odd jobs.

The Japanese policeman, dipping a pen in an inkwell, does not lift his face from a large ledger on the table when he says to the Korean detective by his side, "Tell the old man we will pick out a name for him if he can't make up his mind."

The Korean detective picks up a sheet of paper and shows it to the old man, translating the policeman's words.

The old man shakes his head, looking at the paper, which contains a long list of names. "Anything," he mumbles. "It doesn't matter."

? (50) The Korean detective doesn't translate those words. Instead, he puts his finger on one of the names and says, "How about this one, old man?"

The old man says, "It doesn't matter which. No one's going to call me by that name anyway -- or by any other name."

"Then, this will be recorded as your new name." The Korean detective tells the policeman

the old man's "new name -- a Japanese name.

(55) "All right," says the policeman. He writes the name in the ledger. "What about his family members?"

The Inspector comes back into the room, accompanied by another Japanese policeman. I know him. He is the Chief of Police.

My father exchanges bows with the Chief of Police.

The Chief of Police says, "Such inclement weather, and you honor us by being here in person. Is this your son?"

I edge nearer to my father.

(60) The Chief of Police, a short man with bushy eyebrows and large eyes behind tortoise-shell glasses, looks at the Inspector and says, "Well, I trust the Inspector here will take care of your matter as speedily as he can. Anything, anytime I can be of any help or service, please call on me. I am, indeed, honored by your presence here in person."

My father and he exchange bows again. The Chief of Police goes out of the room, his black leather riding boots jangling and dragging his spurs on the wet floor.

My father takes out a piece of paper from his vest pocket. He hands it to the Inspector. "I assume," he says, "this is what you want, Inspector. I hope you will be pleased.

The Inspector looks at the paper. "Yes. Yes," he says, "Iwamoto. It reminds me of your house by the mountain and, also, of your orchard, with all those rocky mountains around it. I will have it registered. You needn't wait for the certificate, needless to say. I will have someone bring it to your house later."

"Iwamoto" . . . "Iwamoto." I mouth the name. Our new name. My new name. "Iwa" -- rock. "Moto" -- root . . . base . . . foundation. "Rock-foundation." So this is our "new" surname, our Japanese "family" name.

(65) "Come," my father says to me.

The Korean detective leads us out, with the Inspector by my side. At the front door, which the detective holds open, the Inspector gives my father a salute. "I thank you, sir, for taking the time to come in person."

We step out into the cold. The snow is turning into a blizzard. The long line of people is still standing outside, hunched and huddled, rubbing their ears and faces, stamping their feet in the snow. My father pauses for a moment on the steps, one arm around my shoulders, and says:

"Look."

Afraid, bewildered, and cold, I look up at his face and see tears in his eyes.

(70) "Take a good look at all of this," he whispers. "Remember it. Don't ever forget this day."

I look at all those people lined up, from the steps all the way to the gate and outside. I feel a tug at my hand, and I follow him down the steps. We walk by the people slowly, my father not speaking. They bow to him, some removing their hats. My father, bowing back, approaches the group of his friends still in line. In silence, they shake hands.

Then, we move on along the line of people standing in the snow. Some shake hands with my father; most of them merely bow, without words. We are outside the gate. There, too, a long line has formed and is still forming, all the way down the hill, past the gray stucco Methodist church . . . and I am thinking, "We lost our names; I lost my name; and these people are all going to lose their names, too, when they walk into the police station, into that half-empty large hall, when a 'new' name, a Japanese name, is entered in the big ledger with a pen dipped into a dark blue inkwell. . . ."

"What does our new name mean, sir?" I ask my father when we are down the hill and on the main street.

"Foundation of Rock," he says, shielding my face from the bitter-cold snow with his hand. ". . . on this rock I will build by church. . . ."

(75) I do not understand him.

"It's from the Bible," he says.

71 By twelve o'clock, all the children in our class have new names. As soon as each class submits to the principal a complete list of all the new names, the class is sent out of the school to go to the Japanese shrine to pay its respects to the gods of the Empire and make its report to the Emperor -- to announce that we now have Japanese names. At least once a week, each class is required to go to the shrine for an hour of meditation and prayer for the victory and prosperity of the Empire. It was our class's turn the day before, and we "prayed" for the victory and safety of the German *Luftwaffe* pilots who are bombing England in -- as I shall learn years later to call it -- the Battle of Britain.

Every town and every village now has a shrine -- a miniature copy of the "main" shrine somewhere in Japan, where all the souls of the dead soldiers, for example, are supposed to go to rest. The shrine in our town is a small, wooden structure with a gable roof and several flights of stone steps built halfway up the mountain behind our house. The shrine is tended by a middle-aged Japanese Shinto priest, a bald-headed little man with a fat wife, who happens to live in a

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The snow is coming down hard as we struggle up the narrow, icy path in file. Whenever there is a strong wind, the heavily laden pines shower down on us swarms of little icicles and snow. My bare hands are freezing, my bare ears are numb, and my feet are wet and cold with snow that slips inside my boots. Everyone's cheeks are red and raw from the icy wind. We gasp our way up the mountain. There is a small plaza at the foot of the stone steps, and the wind at the clearing is unbearable. The lashing, biting wind shrieks and whines all around us. The town below is invisible — lost in the blizzard, smothered by the raging snow. At the command of our teacher, I have to coax the children to gather and stand in formation. Then we kneel down in the snow, with our heads bowed. The teacher tells the priest, who has come down the steps from the shrine up above, that we are all there to report to the gods and the Emperor our new names. The priest, dressed in a purple-and-white priest's garment, wears a small sort of hat on his bald head. The teacher gives him the list of our new names. The priest reads the names one by one, slowly, bowing his head to the shrine above with each name. Then the priest chants something in a singsong voice, and, when he finishes the chanting, we all bow, now standing up. Snow clings to my pants, and my hands are wet from the snow. We look like a group of snowmen, covered as we are from top to bottom with the snow. At last we are dismissed by the priest, who goes back up the stone steps into the shrine, back to the sanctuary of his gods and the spirit of the Emperor that resides in it. Years later, when, at last, our Liberation comes, we raid the shrine, which is then already wrecked and has been set on fire by the townspeople, and, there, in the inner sanctuary, we discover a small wooden box; in it, we find, wrapped in rice paper, two wooden sticks to which we have been bowing and praying all those years — the sticks from a tree on the "sacred" grounds of the "main" shrine in Japan

(80) Our teacher dismisses the class for the day. The children, no longer in formation, scramble down the mountain path, without a word and without a sound. The teacher wants me to come with him. I follow him down the path in silence. I skid once on the way down and roll over, plunging into a deep pile of snow. He offers his hand and helps me up on my feet. His bare hand clasps my bare hand. He leads me down the mountain on the path, which forks at the foothill, one path going toward the school and the other going into the town, past our house. He takes the path that goes past our house. He is still holding my hand. I do not know how to disengage my hand from his. I do not want to be seen letting him hold my hand, but he grips it firmly and strides toward our house. We pass the Shinto priest's Japanese-style wooden house. We are at the east gate of our house.

— Excerpt 2
begins —

81 Someone must have seen us coming down the path and told my father, because we find my father at the gate waiting for us. He has not changed his clothes.

(TP 81
to
end)

My father and the teacher exchange bows.

I slip away from the teacher and stand by my father.

"No school this afternoon?" says my father to no one in particular

(85) I shake my head.

The teacher says, in Japanese, "Too much has happened to the children today already; so I sent them home for the day."

My father simply nods his head.

"I hope you don't mind my bringing him home," says my teacher, casting a quick glance at me.

"Not at all."

(90) A moment of silence follows, all of us standing there in the pouring snow by the gate. I am wondering if my father will invite the teacher in, but he is quiet and shows no hint of asking the young Japanese in.

Then, the teacher gestures abruptly, as if to touch my face. "I am sorry," he says.

My father gives him a slight bow of his head.

"Even the British wouldn't have thought of doing this sort of primitive thing in India, says the Japanese.

I am at a loss trying to comprehend what he says and means.

(95) ". . . inflicting on you this humiliation . . ." he is saying. ". . . unthinkable for one Asian people to another Asian people, especially we Asians who should have a greater respect for our ancestors. . . ."

"The whole world is going mad, sir," says my father quietly, "going back into another dark age. Japan is no exception."

My teacher nods. "As one Asian to another, sir, I am deeply ashamed."

"I am ashamed, too, sir," says my father, "perhaps for a reason different from yours."

My teacher, without a word, bows to my father, turns round, and disappears into the blinding snow.

(100) "It is a small beginning," says my father, as he has said before about my Korean teacher, who is now somewhere in Manchuria. He gives me a hug. "I am ashamed to look in your eyes," he says — another one of those mysterious things he likes to say. "Someday, your generation will have to forgive us." I don't know what he is talking about, but the scene and the atmosphere of the moment, in the roaring wind and with the snow gone berserk, make me feel dramatic.

"We will forgive you, Father," say I, magnanimously.

His arm tightens around my shoulders. "Come on," he says, leading me into the house.

"We have one more place to go to. Your grandfather and I are going out to the cemetery. Would you like to come?"

I nod. I am, suddenly, too overwhelmed and awed by enigmas beyond my child's understanding to speak.

"I hope our ancestors will be as forgiving as you are," he says. "It is a time of mourning."

And, only then, do I understand the meaning of the black armband on his sleeve and on those of his friends. . . .

Today, I lost my name. Today, we all lost our names.

Excerpt 2
ends _____

February 11, 1940.

RESPONDING IN DISCUSSION OR WRITING

1. Kim refers to a nickname of "Chopstick." What nicknames do you and your friends and family have, and how did those names come about?
2. When the Japanese teacher takes the boy home, what is it that he wants to communicate to the boy's father? Are his comments expected or not? Why or why not? What are the different reasons for father and teacher feeling "ashamed" (paragraphs 97, 98)?
3. Why do you think the boy's father says, "Someday, your generation will have to forgive us" (paragraph 100)? What other events or situations can you think of in which a father might say this to a child, when a whole generation will need to forgive the previous generation.?
4. *Considerations of Style.* Kim uses the present tense for this narrative. Why do you think he has chosen that tense even though he is writing about an incident that happened in February 1940? What effect does the author achieve by mentioning the date only at the end of the chapter?
5. The boy's walk with his father to register their names is described in great detail (paragraph 18): the weather, the shops, the people, the landmarks along the way. What is the effect of such a detailed description? Why do you think Kim includes all these specific details? What emotional reactions does he want his readers to have to his story?