Dr. Sung Won Sohn Narrator

Sarah Mason Interviewer

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Sarah Mason -SM Dr. Sung Won Sohn -SS

SM: I'm talking to Dr. Sung Won Sohn in Minneapolis, Minnesota on December 19, 1979. He's the senior vice president and chief economist for Northwestern National Bank in Minneapolis. This is an interview conducted under the auspices of the Minnesota Historical Society and the interviewer is Sarah Mason.

Dr. Sohn, if we could just begin with your background and your family in Korea and how you happened to come to the United States and Minnesota.

SS: Well, I was one of six children. And my father was a banker. And, well, the reason why I decided to come to the U.S. is because of two reasons. Number one, Korea is a fairly small country. Consequently, opportunities are somewhat limited no matter what area it is. So I was looking for somewhat broader opportunities elsewhere. And number two, there was and still is an American presence, a lot of Americans, so I made American friends and so to me it was natural for me to come to America.

SM: Oh, yes.

SS: The other element was the financial support. I was able to get some financial support from the University of Florida.

SM: I see.

SS: Coming from Korea in those days, it was very hard to get American dollars even if you had Korean money.

SM: Oh.

SS: So financial support was very important. So conditions were right for me to come here at the time.

SM: Yes. What year was that that you came?

SS: 1962.

SM: 1962, I see. So what was the situation in Korea then with the aftermath of the Korean War. It was still quite a big [unclear]?

SS: No, by then the Korean War ended in the early 1950s.

SM: Yes.

SS: So that . . . still, obviously, the country did not recover completely from the Korean War, but by then things were pretty much back to normal.

SM: Yes. But you had finished your education then when you came?

SS: I finished high school.

SM: Oh, the University of Florida.

SS: High school in Korea and then came directly to the University of Florida.

SM: I see. So you spent four years there or more or . . .?

SS: Yes, about four years at the University of Florida.

SM: Yes. I see. What were some of your impressions when you first came to the United States as a young man?

SS: Oh, very confused.

SM: [Chuckles]

SS: And to some extent scared because . . . I couldn't communicate very well and I wasn't familiar with the culture, including food.

SM: Yes.

SS: And I'm sure if I had a plane ticket, I would have gone back home.

SM: [Chuckles]

SS: Because of the change. I mean, any change causes stress.

SM: Yes. Right.

SS: And that to me was a big stress, a very big change, and I suppose I won't ever see another big change in my life like that.

SM: Yes. Well, was that a period of five or six months in which the stress was the greatest or was the whole first year rather difficult or . . .?

SS: Well, probably the first couple of years.

SM: Yes.

SS: Especially from the language point of view. It took a couple of years before I was comfortable.

SM: I see. Well, did you . . . you had studied English somewhat in Korea?

SS: Yes. I did the . . . in Korea all high school students are required to take English, but the problem is they don't teach any conversation at all.

SM: Oh, so it's reading . . .

SS: So yes, mainly reading and so . . . conversation was something very new to me.

SM: Yes. Which part of Korea are you from?

SS: My hometown is a place called Kwang Ju. K-W-A-N-G, J-U. It's the Southwestern part of South Korea.

SM: I see. Yes. I see. And were you among the older children or the younger children of your family?

SS: I was second from the bottom

SM: Second from the bottom.

SS: Of the six children.

SM: Yes. Have any other of your siblings come over?

SS: Yes. My younger brother, he's in Tennessee, the University of . . . well, he graduated from the University of Tennessee.

SM: I see.

SS: Yes, he's an architect.

SM: Oh. Yes. And he works in Tennessee still?

SS: Yes.

SM: Yes, I see. Well, how did you move from Florida to Minnesota? Were there other stops in between?

SS: Oh, yes, lots of stops.

SM: [Chuckles]

SS: First, I went to Wayne State University in Detroit.

SM: I see. That was for graduate study or . . .?

SS: For my master's degree.

SM: I see.

an Collection SS: And then I went to the University of Pittsburgh for my doctorate

SM: And that was in economics, I suppose?

SS: Yes. And then I went to a place called Slippery Rock State College in Pennsylvania to teach for a while.

SM: Oh, I see. Which years were they? In the 1970s?

SS: Oh, that was . . . 1969 to 1973.

SM: I see. So you were there about four years.

SS: Yes. And then I went to Washington, D.C. to work for the U.S. government.

SM: I see. Was that in an advisory capacity or what was your job there?

SS: Yes, I was a senior economist for the President's Council of Economic Advisors.

SM: I see.

SS: Maybe I ought to get you a copy of my resume and that then would spell out all these things here.

SM: Yes, I think that would be very helpful. Yes. I see. And so how did that come about? Was there a particular reason they chose you for this position? Besides your ability [chuckles] are there any other reasons?

SS: Well, obviously, my main attraction of coming here was even before I knew about this bank, I wanted to come to the Midwest because at the time I already had two small children.

SM: Oh.

SS: And I was looking for a place to raise my children.

SM: Yes.

.nington SS: And I didn't want to go to large urban centers like Chicago, Washington, D.C., New York City, you know, Los Angeles.

SM: I see.

SS: So I wanted to come to the Midwest.

SM: Yes.

SS: And, you know, this job came along.

SM: I see. This job was offered to you while you were in Washington then?

SS: Yes.

SM: I see. Could you spell out a little more about what it is in the Midwest that . . . I've heard other Koreans say they preferred to bring up their families here. And I suppose partly it's the smaller urban area, but if you could spell that out a little bit, it would help.

SS: Well, first, I think that, you know, the people are much nicer.

SM: Yes. And is this a regional or a state . . . was it Minnesota in particular, or Wisconsin, the whole upper Midwest region?

SS: I think the whole upper Midwest region is like that, too.

SM: Yes.

SS: [Unclear] to a foreigner, foreign in the sense that, you know, not only being from Korea but from other parts of the country.

SM: Yes.

SS: You know, the kind of people that you have to deal with, that's very important.

SM: Yes. So do you feel that the reception of foreigners is somewhat more open here? Minnesota is known to be a state of immigrants.

SS: Yes. Well, I mean, for that matter, you know, it's true for any other state.

SM: Yes. [Chuckles] They're all . . . yes. Somehow there seems to be quite a lot of consciousness of that here in Minnesota. The Scandinavians and . . . it isn't too far back. [Chuckles]

SS: Well, you know, I think that Minnesota is more . . . much more stable in terms of population because I know most of the people, they were essentially born and raised here.

SM: Yes.

SS: Whereas if you go to Washington, D.C., for instance, you know, almost nobody's from Washington, D.C.

SM: That's true.

SS: People are constantly moving. It's a very transient area.

SM: Yes. Yes. So its stability would offer something that . . . and a kind of environment you would like for your children or was it also the kind of environment congenial to someone coming from another country?

SS: Both, I think. You know the stability and congeniality and . . . if I may put it this way, more of a conservative atmosphere.

SM: Yes.

SS: Whether it is in education or the way people dress. And less crime.

SM: Yes.

SS: Fewer traffic jams.

SM: [Chuckles] That's a big help.

SS: And less pollution.

SM: Many Asian immigrants that I've talked with about—I've also interviewed Chinese and Filipino in addition to Koreans—have expressed quite a bit of concern about bringing up

children in the American environment. And do you see this as a little bit less problematic in terms of drugs and the problems of bringing up children in this society?

SS: Yes, that . . . that certain was an important factor.

SM: Yes.

SS: That's what I meant by more of a conservative atmosphere.

SM: Yes.

SS: I'm sure drugs are a problem, but less of a problem here than they would be, say, in New York City schools.

SM: Right. Oh yes, considerably less, I'd say, too. Some people have also expressed the view that Minneapolis was essentially a kind of academic community. I hadn't really thought of it that way but the university is a very big influence. I don't know if that had anything to do with your view of Minnesota or had any . . .

SS: Not in my case.

SM: Yes, because you weren't coming to an academic job. Yes. Well, what about the business atmosphere here? Would that have something to do with your taking this job?

SS: Well, yes. I think, you know, the . . . compared to the size of community, we have an unusually large number of large . . . large, excellent and good corporations headquartered here.

SM: I see.

SS: And for an economist, that's important because . . . that way you can exchange opinions and views and [unclear] and learn from them.

SM: Oh, yes. Yes. So I suppose that you interact very much with the other bankers and economists here.

SS: Well, [unclear] you know, [unclear] economists as well as . . .

SM: Economists.

SS: . . . other business people, because it is my job to keep track of what they do.

SM: I see. Yes. Are you still on the President's Advisory Council, too?

SS: No, that was the job I had before I came here.

SM: That was a full time job.

SS: [Unclear.]

SM: Yes, I see. Well, have you, in Minnesota, felt really pretty completely accepted by your colleagues and your fellow workers? Has there been any kind of discrimination in say buying a house or in any other way?

SS: Well, if anything, you know, in my particular case, the answer to that is no.

SM: Yes.

SS: In my case, I would say it's probably the other way around. Because of the . . . all the publicity that I've gotten.

SM: On you.

SS: I more or less am readily recognized and, you know, people generally tend to go an extra step to help me out.

SM: I see. The real estate people, too?

SS: The . . . well, when I, you know . . . but, first of all, I don't think there is any discrimination in housing that I . . . that I [unclear] that I know of, certainly no Koreans [unclear].

SM: Yes.

SS: If you look at the areas and the type of houses that they live in, I don't think that's true.

SM: Hmmm.

SS: So most of the Korean [unclear] . . . most of the Koreans in this community are [unclear] or they are, you know, professional people, the doctors and the business people. Or they are students. So that . . .

SM: Yes. [Unclear]

SS: See, most of them are in . . . in high income brackets.

SM: Right.

SS: And so they tend to be respected by the rest of the community.

SM: Yes. I did hear of a few cases among Chinese who were professors at the university. And I suppose there are always a few cases where that . . . but it does seem . . . I think [unclear] which

they certainly were in a high enough income bracket to [unclear] but I think this is maybe the exception.

SS: Well . . .

SM: But I don't know whether there are particular areas where this is a problem or not.

SS: I think, you know, people of a minority race, they always have this thing in the back of their minds that . . .

SM: Yes.

SS: You know, someone's going to . . . they are different. Therefore they are likely to be discriminated.

SM: Right.

SS: So that a perfectly harmless comment might be construed as discrimination to the individual.

SM: [Chuckles] Yes. Sure.

SS: They are more self-conscious.

SM: Yes.

SS: And so I think it's . . . I wouldn't be surprised at all if that was more of a communication problem as opposed to an actual discrimination.

SM: I didn't have firsthand contact with the case. But some other Chinese told me that he had trouble buying a house. But, as I say, I shouldn't even try to discuss it, since I haven't talked with him yet, I suppose.

SS: Based on my experience, I think, as I said, you know . . . I don't know, at least the people that I've come in contact with, they, if anything, went out of their way to help you out because you are a foreigner.

SM: Oh. Yes. Well, Asians particularly seem to have a very positive image here as far as I've ever been aware of. And even the large influx of refugees now, I think, is rather . . . there's some, you know, worries about jobs and so on, but they seem to have a pretty good reception, too.

SS: Yes, right now the minority community is not such a big portion of the population in Minnesota so that it is not . . . it's not that much of a problem. Now I think it can become a problem [unclear] issue when [unclear], you know, we have more and more refugees.

SM: Yes. Yes.

SS: And it's only natural that when the minority becomes a very large segment of the society, you know, it's natural to expect some conflicts.

SM: Right. I think we can expect some.

SS: Yes, right, just like the Puerto Rican community in New York City.

SM: Right. The competition for jobs in communities.

SS: Yes. I mean, even if the Puerto Ricans were Asians . . .

SM: [Chuckles] There would still be conflicts.

SS: That's right.

SM: Yes. Well, I've been looking at, you know, some of the factors in the environment here, even such things as the harsh climate, a relatively low population density, this kind of thing. Do you think that enters into the kind of social environment we have here?

SS: Oh, I think that's very important. You know, when people are crowded in together . . . this is true for any animals, for that matter, crowded in together, you know, you do have more conflicts and tensions and stress.

SM: Yes. So you think the low population of Minnesota is one factor.

SS: Oh, yes. The population density is important, yes.

SM: Yes. And do you think the harsh weather is a factor in low density of population? [Chuckles]

SS: Oh, yes, probably.

SM: Probably. I think so, too, because it doesn't attract. It will never attract a very large population for that reason, I think. Well, is weather a factor in Koreans' immigration to Minnesota or is North Korea also a fairly harsh climate?

SS: Yes, the weather in Korea is not a whole lot different than Minnesota's weather.

SM: Oh. Is that only the North or the South, too?

SS: Both, yes. Korea is . . .

SM: Oh, the whole place is pretty . . .

SS: Well, Korea is about the size of . . . really, Minnesota, so that there isn't a whole lot of variations.

SM: Ah, I see. Oh, that might account for . . . I haven't heard any Koreans complain about the weather. [Chuckles] I think, you know, people that come from a tropical climate like Saigon it's really a terribly big adjustment for them. Oh, so it's really not too different then. Let's see, what else I was going to ask you here. So you came for education and for work opportunity. In other words, you did plan to stay maybe when you came . . .?

SS: No, I did not.

SM: You did not plan on it.

SS: [Unclear] I intended to go back [unclear].

SM: And then when you decided to stay, was that in terms of a particular job or you made a decision that this was a better opportunity for you?

SS: Well, it's just a . . . you know, the . . . I don't think you can . . . I could pinpoint just one thing, but the whole environment that was here was . . . I like the whole environment, the [unclear], the employment opportunities, the people, too.

SM: This is in the United States or [unclear]?

SS: The United States because when I decided to stay . . .

SM: [Unclear] here.

SS: Yes.

SM: I see. Well, I guess you have said you aren't too closely associated with the Korean community.

SS: Yes.

SM: But you have, I'm sure, at least some impression of it and some impression of . . . well, have you been on the West Coast at all? You've been in the East Coast more, haven't you?

SS: I have been to the West Coast.

SM: You've been there, too.

SS: Not to live, but . . .

SM: Yes.

SS: To visit, yes.

SM: Would you want to make a comparison between say a very large concentration of Koreans such as you might find in Los Angeles, or in New York, or Chicago even. That's quite a large [unclear].

SS: Well, I think number one, the Korean community is considerably smaller relative to Chicago, L.A., [unclear].

SM: Yes. It's a big factor, I think.

SS: So that makes for a closely knit community. That's number one.

SM: Yes.

SS: Number two, as I mentioned earlier, most of the people and Koreans in Minnesota, they tend to be highly educated and in earning power and so on, very high compared to the [unclear] standards. And so they will be [unclear] upper income brackets or even average, so that . . . you know, that has something to do with . . . like what I'm referring to is . . . if you go to L.A., you know, you hear about, you know, conflicts among Koreans out there and with . . . because of [unclear] or whatever.

SM: Between factions in the Korean community or with Koreans and the outside . . .?

SS: Amongst Koreans.

SM: Within the Korean community?

SS: Yes. You don't see that here.

SM: Right. Because this does seem to be a very close knit . . . there are . . . the only thing that might be construed as conflicts are the splits in the churches, but they don't seem to be hostile. All the groups still work together. And I think that's also true in the larger concentrations of the split. The churches split quite frequently.

SS: Oh, and to some extent it's normal, you know.

SM: Yes.

SS: I guess that everybody wants to have their own denomination.

SM: Right.

SS: So it's no different than, you know, what happens in American . . .

SM: Right. It's very similar. Yes. I'm really interested in that church phenomenon in that so many of them seem to have started as non-denominational and then . . . someone told me that the pastor usually wants to have a denominational tie, and probably linked to his background training. And I see the denominations as essentially Western divisions to start with, whether that's true in looking at this or not. I mean, whether that bears on this or not, I don't know.

SS: Well, to begin with, you know, the churches in this area got started as a fellowship, and it's quite . . . quite common in the Korean communities nationally. History Project

SM: In Korea, too, or here?

SS: No, here.

SM: Here in the immigrant community.

SS: Yes. It's a good place to get together.

SM: Yes.

SS: That's [unclear] starts out where there's a fellowship

SM: Right.

SS: And then you require a minister. And the minister is usually interested in the theological aspects and denomination then there's a... then members get more and more into religion, you know, they . . . they tend to pursue their own . . . you know, the religious backgrounds or whatever.

SM: Yes. Right. And some have come from a particular denomination in Korea.

SS: Yes.

SM: Although I guess many have joined the churches here and have not particularly been [unclear]. But the whole . . . the social need does seem to be a very big factor.

SS: Oh, yes.

SM: Yes. And I'm interested to see that the ministers I've talked to are particularly concerned that that shouldn't be the main thing. I mean, I see nothing wrong with that being the motivation from my own liberal Protestant background, that's the way I would view it, but the ministers are very concerned that the religious aspects should be first.

SS: Yes.

SM: And I suppose it's fairly natural to expect that of a minister.

SS: Sure. Sure, yes.

SM: But I wonder if there is some conflict within the congregations about what should be first or whether one should be first and one second or whether they're of equal importance.

SS: I think that, you know, I don't go to a Korean church so I really [unclear].

SM: Yes, it's hard to . . . yes. It seems that some of the splits have been concerned with that. How big a part the social services should play.

SS: I wouldn't be surprised, yes.

SM: But looking at it from a sociological point of view that seems to be a very big function of the churches. And quite rightly, I think.

SS: Sure. Yes. I don't know whether that should be the main part but I think that . . .

SM: Right I guess you don't need to call it a church if that's the whole thing of course.

SS: Yes. Well, I think, you know, that obviously has to be an important aspect.

SM: Yes, Especially in the . . . well, is that an important aspect of the church in Korea? Or this is an immigrant phenomenon, I think.

SS: I really . . . I didn't go to church in Korea, so that . . .

SM: You weren't connected there to it.

SS: I'm not that . . . so I . . . I go to church, an American church with my family.

SM: I see.

SS: But I'm not that familiar with all the theological aspects and [unclear] of that.

SM: Yes, I see. Yes. Well, I guess your position may be similar to the position of Koreans living in Morris, Minnesota, for instance. [Unclear] Professor [unclear – name?], and Professor Khan [sp?]. They seem to be very much integrated into the university community and into the surrounding community, too. And I don't know whether . . . would you foresee this being the case with maybe most Koreans in several decades from now? Or do you think there will always be a place for the ethnic community . . . ethnic church? I suppose as long as more immigrants are still coming, for instance. But what would you forecast in the future concerning the ethnic community?

SS: Well, you know, looking at some of the other towns and Orientals in general, you know, they kind of tend to . . . live close together, you know, like Chinatowns and the Greek towns and the Polish towns and Italian towns and . . . among Orientals I think there is, you know, there is a greater reason, too. The reason is, you know, they look different and have a different culture than let's say some of the Europeans and the Greeks and the Polish and . . .

SM: Yes.

SS: So the point is that, you know, some of the Europeans tend to do that, the Greeks and the Polish, and Orientals are likely to do so, too, in my estimation.

SM: Do you think that would be mainly because of the [unclear] the looks or is . . .?

SS: That would be part of it.

SM: Maybe the cultural reasons, too, [unclear]. Do you think?

SS: Well, why that shouldn't be true after two generations, but then if you look at the Chinese they tend to do that.

SM: Yes. Yes, some who have grown up here are still, it seems, to be very . . . well, some of the . . . say the college students and so on, it's kind of a new consciousness now during the 1960s, which was going on there throughout the country. But it seems to me that it's easier maybe for the professionals to integrate into the larger community.

SS: Yes.

SM: Would that be a sound observation?

SS: Sure.

SM: And that's because they are in a profession where they're obviously going to be working mainly with non-Asians.

SS: Yes, well being here and being successful in a professional field means that, you know, you have been accepted. Otherwise, you would not be successful.

SM: I see. Right. But what about a successful owner of a Chinese restaurant? He still doesn't seem to integrate as much as a professional such as yourself. Because your success is in the community itself.

SS: Yes.

SM: Rather than simply a success in making a go of it financially. I don't know. What are your thoughts on that? [Chuckles]

SS: Well, you know, the Chinese restaurant owner, the person is selling an item unique to their culture, so still there is a strong tie to their background and culture.

SM: Oh, yes. Yes, that's true. They're dependent on the ethnicity of the . . .

SS: Yes. That's right.

SM: Yes. I suppose also the professionals have a better handle on the language.

SS: Probably, because they are forced to work with that, you know, the native population and so on.

SM: Right. I don't want to keep you too long. I guess those were the main things I wanted to ask you. Maybe you have some things, too, you would like to say about your own career? How did you begin to make these predictions [chuckles] that are so well accepted and . . .?

SS: Oh, I don't know. [Chuckles] They're not . . . they're not always right, so . . .

SM: Well... they seem to be. [Chuckles] I have noticed that your more recent ones are a little gloomier about the economic situation than, say, what you were saying last summer. Has the situation changed markedly?

SS: Oh, I think that, you know, probably the economy has been doing somewhat better than I thought.

SM: Oh. Yes, I see. I think you've been saying, as I understand it, that the economy in Minnesota itself is relatively really healthy.

SS: Yes. Yes.

SM: Yes.

SS: Just let me just check with my secretary . . .

SM: Sure.