

 **UNTOLD TALES:**
TWO LESSER KNOWN PERSONAL AND
SOCIAL-LINGUISTIC HISTORIES
OF SAKHALIN KOREANS

Andrew Logie

University of Helsinki

Based on two interviews, this paper is a description of the sociolinguistic history of three ethnic Koreans living on Sakhalin island: a second generation mother and her daughter in the south, and a second generation lady living in the far north. The circumstances of the two families share a point of common geographic origin in northeastern Korea but otherwise their historical experiences differ from one another. Significantly, both are also aberrant to the dominant and well documented “victimization narrative” of Sakhalin Koreans prevalent in the popular imagination and discourse pertaining in South Korea today.

Данная статья основывается на двух интервью и представляет собой описание социолингвистической истории трех этнических корейцев, живущих на о. Сахалин: матери второго поколения эмигрантов и ее дочери, живущих на юге острова, и женщины второго поколения эмигрантов, живущей на севере острова. Обе семьи происходят из северо-восточной Кореи, однако имеют различный исторический опыт проживания на Сахалине. В обоих случаях наблюдаются отличия от “нарратива виктимизации”, который характерен для общепринятого представления в современной Южной Корее.

1. INTRODUCTION

Earliest Korean migration to Sakhalin began around the 1870s. According to Chekhov’s census of 1897, there were just 67 Koreans out of a total Sakhalin population of 28,000; they all lived in the southern port town of Korsakov and the majority worked as fishermen. Following the 1945 Japanese withdrawal, the population of ethnic Koreans was estimated to be 43,000 and this number has stayed relatively constant since then. In 2010 Koreans represented around 5% of the Sakhalin population, compared to Russians 80% and Japanese 0.06%.¹

¹ These percentages come from recent Russian census data provided by Nadezhda Mamontova (personal communication).

Most articles and books on Sakhalin Koreans focus on an established narrative of victimization. The core components of this include: the coerced migration of up to 150,000 Koreans predominantly from the southeast of the Korean peninsula to work in Japanese mines on Sakhalin from the late 1930s;² dangerous forced labour conditions there resulting in injuries and fatalities combined with discrimination and abuse under Japanese overseers; local massacres of Koreans by the Japanese in the wake of the 1945 defeat; perceived abandonment by Japan during withdrawal and subsequent repatriation; “statelessness” under the Soviet Union; being victims of the Korea division and Cold War relations both from North Korea blocking their return to South Korea, and neglect of the issue by South Korea until the 1990s; and finally their return to South Korea only in old age and ill health with the accompanying difficulty of adjustment to South Korean society and separation from children left behind on Sakhalin.

This narrative of suffering is not necessarily at all inaccurate for the majority of Koreans who went to Sakhalin; whilst dominating popular conceptions and discourse, however, it cannot be considered to represent the experience of all Sakhalin Koreans, particularly not of those first, second, and third generations still remaining on the island. Principally authored by South Korean subjectivity, it supports the anti-Japanese discourse and focuses only on the ideal of “returning” to South Korea.³

In particular, the two cases presented below are both aberrant from the standard narrative for reasons beginning with the fact that both families discussed came from northern Korea – and only one during the Japanese era – yet travelled to Sakhalin directly and not as continental Koreans via Siberia or Vladivostok, the northern route as suggested by Choi (2004: 117).

2. INTERVIEW WITH YULIA AND IRINA

The interviews with Yulia and her daughter, Irina, were conducted at Sakhalin Regional Museum (Сахалинский государственный областной краеведческий музей) in Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk on 6 August 2014. Present throughout were myself (Andrew Logie), Suvi Valsta, and Eeva-Maria Heinonen; around 20 minutes into the interview we were joined by John Whitman and Anna Bugaeva. The total length of the interviews lasted around 1 hour 48 mins, the first hour focused on Yulia and the remainder primarily on Irina.

2 Yi (2004:3) suggests 60,000 between 1939–1945.

3 See Choi (2004) and all Hankyoreh articles on Sakhalin Koreans.

The interview with Yulia was conducted in Japanese by myself and Valsta with contributions also from Whitman. The interview with Irina was in Russian with questions from myself interpreted by Bugaeva.

Yulia (Юлия), in Korean and Japanese pronunciation Yuria, is the Russian name of Mrs. Kim who also had the Japanese diminutive name Yuki-chan (full Korean name redacted). Yulia was born in November 1927 in South Hamgyeong-do province of what is now North Korea, in a village not far from Hamheung city on the east coast. She gave the exact day of her birth; we neglected to check if this was reckoned by the lunar calendar but, given her subsequent upbringing, it seems likely it was not. She also wrote the exact address of her home village in Sino-Korean characters.

Around 1930, Yulia moved to Sakhalin aged one and a half. Her father had gone earlier, and Yulia was subsequently taken there by her mother together with her older sister. Her parents came from the same home region but she did not know their dates of birth.

Yulia periodized her life under three historical eras: the Japanese empire (日帝), the Soviet Union, and modern Russia. Of these her strongest memories and formative experiences were during the Japanese empire; she claimed to have few memories of the subsequent periods implying she was less willing to discuss them.

Yulia said she had lived in seven different locations on Karafuto, but when asked to list them she identified only six. The first place the family lived was Esutoro (恵須取 Ru. Углегорск Uglegorsk); around the beginning of the war (perhaps meaning c.1939) they moved to Taihei (太平 Ru. Ударный Udarnyj) for her father to work at the Ōji-seishi (王子製紙) paper factory and they stayed for two years before moving on to Tōro (塔路 Ru. Шахтёрск Shakhtersk). Yulia had subsequently lived in Maoka (真岡 Ru. Холмск Kholm'sk), Higashi-Sakutan (東柵丹 Ru. Туманово Tumanovo), and finally Toyohara (豊原 Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk); it is not clear at which point her father died, or when she stopped living with her parents though the latter was likely upon marriage.

Whilst her father worked as a labourer the family remained poor and were unable to live together; it seems her father would have slept in worker dormitories whilst Yulia lived with her mother and sister “in a hole” (lit. 穴の間), a phrase which, whether taken literally or not, well depicts their lowly circumstances.

With the onset of the war, more and/or better paid work became available to her father as Japanese were called up to fight; from that time they were first able to eat white rice and Yulia was able to attend a secondary girls school (女学校). During the interview Yulia expressed awareness of the irony that their material circumstances actually improved with the war and commented this was

why America was constantly at war, similarly observing how the Korean War had economically benefitted the Japanese.

Yulia first began school aged eight, and graduated from secondary school in 1945. She commented on the Japanese zeal (熱心) for educating their children such that every small town had had a school. She started primary school in Taihei (恵須取の太平) before moving to Tōro the following year where she graduated; she subsequently attended a girls school in Maoka. Her classmates were “aside from us” – implying a number of Koreans (if not merely her own sister) – mostly Japanese with a tiny number of white émigré Russians (白系ロシア人), Ainu, and Ghilyak (Nivkh). The language of instruction, of course, was Japanese.

At home, her parents spoke Korean to one another but Yulia and her sister spoke only Japanese. Only those older than middle-aged spoke Korean; anyone younger spoke Japanese. She observed that there was no freedom in language or writing; Japanese was compulsory.

As a consequence, following the 1945 Japanese defeat and withdrawal, Yulia was left knowing only Japanese. Since then her language has become a mix of Japanese, Russian, and Korean. Her ethnic Korean friends spoke Japanese but most have since died or moved to South Korea. In this linguistic context Yulia lamented that she suffered heavily (酷い目に遭った) owing to Japanese policies and the war.

Yulia did not have too much to say about her late husband – more was learnt from Irina – except that he was born the same year as herself, from the same region in northern Korea and had come to Sakhalin at a similar time. He had died in November 1988. When together, they had spoken to one another using a mixture of Japanese, Korean, and Russian, though she claimed they had only argued and never had a conversation.

Yulia had taken Russian nationality during the early 1950s to enable her children to be able to cross to the mainland and attend schools and universities in Moscow and elsewhere; previous to that she had had a passport without nationality (無国籍). As far as she was concerned, there was no other option (仕方がなくて) than to become a Russian national.

She had three daughters, Irina being the eldest. Despite Yulia’s own native ability in Japanese, she purposefully did not use it with her children so that they grew up to be Russian speaking to the point that they experienced communication problems between mother and daughter. Yulia’s reasoning in not teaching them Japanese was that she herself had suffered (苦勞) because of her language situation and she did not want to impose a second language on her children; of course there were likely also political and social considerations at the time but she did not hint at these.

Yulia herself has remained most comfortable with the language of her childhood; with her friends moved back to Korea or dead, she spends her days watching Japanese television which she said kept her alive. She had a great appreciation for Chinese characters – Japanese *kanji* (漢字) – and thought poorly both of Korea no longer using *hanja* as well as the simplified forms in mainland China. In more recent times she has worked as a guide-interpreter for Japanese visitors and also taught *kanji* at local Russian schools.

Apparently it became possible for small numbers of Sakhalin Koreans to visit South Korea from around 1987; Yulia and Irina first visited in 1989 and she has since travelled there five more (?) times on annual South Korean government sponsored trips (母國訪問 lit. ‘motherland visits’). She has various relatives there including some who moved back immediately after the war, her younger sister-in-law, and her own younger sister (previously not mentioned) who had only recently permanently moved there (永住できました).

Yulia has also visited Japan at least once. During the 1990s an old Japanese classmate from the Maoka girls school, now living in Sapporo, heard that Yulia was still in Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk and so, together with her friends, collected money and paid for Yulia to visit them in Japan for a reunion.

Yulia’s eldest daughter, Irina, also had a Korean name (redacted); she was born in 1956 in Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk, and was consequently more able and willing to discuss the postwar Soviet period during which she had grown up.

Irina’s nationality is Russian, essentially from birth, although she could not receive a passport until age 16 and no citizenship was recorded on her birth certificate. The question of citizenship was first raised when she joined the Komsomol (Young Communist League) as without it she could not have been admitted; by this time her parents had already taken Russian citizenship so it was no difficulty for Irina.

Irina had some basic level of Korean language which she said she acquired within her family; contrary to Yulia’s information, Irina said her parents spoke in Korean to one another and she also listened to her maternal grandparents speaking Korean; before starting elementary school her Russian was bad and it was at school that she learnt it.

The first year of her schooling was at a Korean school but this was subsequently closed after which she attended a Russian school at which there were no other Koreans.⁴

4 According to Yi (2004: 106–107), Korean schools were opened by the Soviet government in 1947 and taught five subjects including Russian up to 7th grade. By 1963 [*sic*] the number of Korean schools on Sakhalin had reached around 32 with a total of 7,239 students, however, all Korean schools were closed in 1962.

Irina's father was a photographer with a studio; he worked as such his whole life. Her mother, that is Yulia, was a tailor or seamstress and made custom clothes at the photography studio.⁵ Postwar their circumstances improved such that they became relatively well to do.

Irina was consequently able to continue her education through to state university which she attended in Vladivostok where she majored in Russian language and literature. Bugaeva mentioned that Vladivostok had one of only three state universities in Russia where it was possible to study Japanese and Korean. At the time, however, Irina was not interested in Asian languages and she did not associate with those students.

Whilst professing love for Russian language, in retrospect she regrets not having learned Korean or Japanese. She claimed when she was a child she had asked her mother to teach her Japanese but was refused.

Irina's husband was an ethnic Korean from the continent, met in Vladivostok belying that she did form connections with other local Koreans there. Five to six generations of his family had lived in Russia; c.1937 under Stalin they had been deported to Kazakhstan, but he had been born in Sverdlovsk (now Yekaterinburg) to where they had subsequently moved for work before apparently returning to Vladivostok. Irina's husband could not speak Korean; his mother had a passive knowledge and his grandfather had been fluent.

According to Irina, Sakhalin Koreans refer to the continental Koreans in Russian as *materikovskie* (материковские lit. 'continentals') and in Korean as *keunttang-saram* (큰땅사람 lit. 'big land people' meaning 'mainlanders'). Continental Korean Russians refer to themselves as *goryeo-saram* (고려사람) but this term is not used by the Sakhalin Koreans.

Irina told how after 1945 various continental Korean Russian specialists were "invited" to work with the Korean population on Sakhalin. She confirmed a question (based on previous Wikipedia sourced information) that Sakhalin Koreans were often involved in radio broadcasting because they had better levels of spoken Korean, but added that all higher editing (and likely censorship) jobs were taken by continental Koreans; this was explained as being due to the continental Koreans having better levels of Soviet education and Russian ability.⁶ Education was, again, related to citizenship which left Sakhalin Koreans at a further disadvantage.

5 Not completely clear if the clothes were used at the studio, or that was simply where she did her work.

6 See Wikipedia "Sakhalin Koreans: Language", accessed 12 Sept. 2014.

Concerning ethnic identity, Irina still considered herself to be Korean. In response to what this meant, she at first took a pause and then replied: “To be myself.” Her husband is ethnic Korean and both her children similarly married Koreans, but speak Russian. She has a son, 36, a daughter 29, and three grandchildren. Although they are Russian speaking, their Koreanness is manifested in other aspects of life such as cuisine and upbringing.

Her daughter-in-law, graduated from the Korean department at Sakhalin University and so speaks good Korean. Ethnic Koreans can now visit South Korea for 90 days without a visa and, apparently, some own property there.

Irina learnt Korean cooking from her mother. They make *kimchi* but do not use *hang'ari* pots for storage; they would like to use wooden barrels but they are too expensive so they use plastic ones instead. Irina's home has a garden, but other Sakhalin Koreans use *kimchi* fridges. She makes 120–130 kg of *kimchi* each year; larger families can make up to 300 kg. Some Russians now make *kimchi* owing to mixed marriages. They have a dish they believe is unique to Sakhalin consisting of fried *kimchi* and pork.

Both Yulia and Irina considered themselves to be ethnic Korean but for neither was language a determining factor; both were in fact proud of, and had appreciation for the primary languages they did speak, Japanese and Russian respectively, which again, in both cases were obtained through schooling rather than within the family. This also, technically, made both of their mother tongues Korean, and as a consequence Korean language still had a presence and role to play, especially in communication between mother and daughter, in spite of their limited command.

Particularly in the case of Yulia, it is of note that her Korean self-identity – at least as she expressed it – did not in any way define itself in opposition to the Japanese. Her school friends had all been Japanese and she continued to interact with Japanese, both language and people, whenever possible. After the interview had formally finished and we came outside of the museum, she spoke about how more recently she had been instrumental in opposing the demolition of the museum and working with the Japanese who stepped in to pay for its full restoration. One of the last things she said to me in Japanese as we walked to her in taxi was that she hates Korean language; this was mainly in the context of their no longer using *hanja* characters but perhaps again reflected her own frustration that she had not more fully learnt the language.

Based on this single brief meeting, my overall impression was that Yulia considered herself ethnically Korean but was proud of her Japanese language ability and disliked Korean – to the point of downplaying her ability – because she had not had the opportunity to learn it more fully.

3. INTERVIEW WITH VALENTINA

The interview with Mrs Yi – Valentina (Валентина)⁷ – was conducted at her home in Nekrasovka (Некрасовка: a small village on the west coast of Sakhalin 60 minutes’ drive from Okha) on 16 August 2014. Present throughout were myself and Juha Janhunen; the interview was conducted by Juha Janhunen in Russian with additional questions suggested by myself. The total interview lasted around 1 hour 50 minutes, including a pause for tea and *kimchi*.⁸

Yi Valentina was born in February 1949 in the village of Lyugi (Люги), though she said official records have her born in nearby Rybnovsk, Okhinsky district (Ru. Рыбновск, Охинский).

Valentina’s father and mother were both from North Hamgyeong-do province, born in 1917 and 1922 respectively; the exact places of birth are unknown, but the family home town is Kimchaek-si (金策市). The parents moved to Sakhalin from North Korea in 1948, leaving behind a daughter – Valentina’s elder sister born 1944 – with Valentina’s grandmother but taking their son, born in 1941 who now lives in South Korea.⁹

Upon moving to Sakhalin, Valentina’s father worked as a fisherman and did so throughout most of his life, rarely spending much time at home; after retirement, he became chief of “fishing net sewing production”. In the early 1990s, after the Soviet period, he received an award for his work as a fisherman. This should have been given earlier but had not been possible as he had not taken Russian citizenship until the 1980s; previous to that he had been without nationality.

Valentina lived with her parents whilst attending primary school in Rybnovsk, before subsequently being sent to boarding school also in Rybnovsk. In Lyugi there lived only Russians and Koreans. From primary school onwards she was surrounded by Russian children and learnt Russian as her first language; she spoke only Russian with her parents who she claims both learnt the language

7 Valentina preferred to use her Korean name but it has been redacted here.

8 English translations were provided by Janhunen during the interview; a summary English transcript was later prepared by Ksenia Shagal.

9 These circumstances agree with Yi (2004: 112–113), referencing Go (1990), that between 1946–1949 around 50,000 North Korean workers were sent to the Russian Far East. According to one report around 500 came to Sakhalin, and of these half stayed (citing Lee 1998: 165). However, according to Go (1990: 41), in 1956 around 1,037 Koreans holding North Korean nationality and 136 without (Yi suggests likely from southern Korea) returned to North Korea. Contradictorily again, according to one of Yi’s informants (문수자 born 1936) “several tens of thousands” of North Koreans came from 1948 and stayed for terms of 5 year, being referred to as “voluntary” workers (박해노동자); amongst this number are likely included many Central Asian Koreans who briefly returned to North Korea upon its establishment.

quickly upon coming to Sakhalin. Her father worked with Russians, and he learnt also to write in Russian which her mother did not.

Her parents' native first language was Korean and both could write in Korean though she did not have any surviving examples. They spoke Korean "in the same way", implying their shared home region. She was not sure if they knew languages other than Korean and Russian; she did not mention Japanese, for example, though there is a possibility considering their literate education level.¹⁰ Her father had also visited China when he was young but she did not know if he had learnt any Chinese as a result.

Valentina herself speaks only Russian but appeared to have a limited passive knowledge of Korean and knew various cultural words, for example, associated with Korean cuisine.

Valentina's elder brother, who was aged seven when they came to Sakhalin and has more recently moved to South Korea, speaks "a little" Korean but also Russian. Her elder sister who remained in the North – where she later managed to meet her – and spoke only Korean.

Up until around 1953 or 1955 there had been a small number – even a community – of North Koreans in their village of Lyugi. During this time she remembered they practiced Korean traditions, dressing in Korean costume (*jeogori* 저고리) making rice cakes and bowing to elders, both at festival times and for elders' birthdays, particularly the fifty years birthdays. Her family also followed the lunar calendar for birthdays, but switched after this period.

All other Korean families eventually left the region, either returning to North Korea or moving elsewhere, to places such as Kazakhstan. Valentina's parents remained in Lyugi until the village was "closed" after which they moved to Nekrasovka. Aside from her period at boarding school in Rybnovsk, Valentina lived with her parents in Lyugi until 1969 when she moved to Yuzhno-Sahalinsk where she studied at a branch of the Khabarovsk Technical State University (today Pacific State University, Тихоокеанский государственный университет); she went on to work in trade logistics as a specialist in food sales.

In 1971 Valentina married the first of two husbands, an ethnic Korean, with whom she had two sons before later divorcing. This first husband was born in Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk and spoke Korean as he had attended a Korean school (조선 학교); his parents had come to Sakhalin from southern Korea during the Japanese era. Her second husband had been half Ukrainian and half Russian

¹⁰ But it is equally unknown to me how successful Japanese language education policies were in the more remote northeast of the peninsula.

from Kalmykia; they had no children and subsequently divorced “on account of the harsh Sakhalin climate”.

Her two sons were born in 1971 and 1975. The older son has lived in Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk his entire life, the younger son married a Russian but died in a car accident. Neither spoke Korean.

Late in life her father became maligned with cancer and in 1995 Valentina moved back north to their home in Nekrasovka where, after her father’s death, she subsequently lived with her mother until she too passed away around 2011. Valentina initially had not planned on permanently moving back, but felt obligated to stay in order to tend to her parents’ graves according to Korean custom, though it was not evident that she performs *jesa* ancestral rites.

Valentina visited North Korea annually four times between 1986 and 1990. The elder sister in North Korea had apparently reestablished contact with Valentina through a Korean newspaper in Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk; Valentina did not order that newspaper, but the information somehow reached her. Valentina’s sister was a doctor; she was married to a professor of medicine who spoke Russian and had the opportunity to regularly travel abroad. It was he who had originally located the dispersed family; this had taken some time because when Valentina’s parents came to Sakhalin their family name had been Cyrillicized as “I (И)” rather than the more common “Li (Ли)”. It seems they had been able to exchange letters for a time but it was not clear what had caused the subsequent loss of contact, or exactly when it was.

Her first trip to North Korea had been organized through a travel agency but subsequently she visited “as a relative”, staying with her sister. Upon her first visit to North Korea, Valentina had not been able to meet her sister immediately; it was not even entirely clear if they had met on the first trip. Despite this, Valentina claimed North Korea was a wonderful country and had been impressed with how clean Pyongyang was. When she did eventually meet with her sister, they were unable to communicate directly and her brother-in-law had to interpret for them. Although, again somewhat unclear (or rather contrary to assumptions), they had not met in Pyongyang, but in the sister’s hometown of Kimchaek; throughout this period they were able to freely exchange letters between Sakhalin and North Korea. Valentina produced a written envelope which indeed had the sender’s address in Kimchaek.

Around 1990 Valentina’s sister and brother-in-law also managed to visit her in Sakhalin; during the early 1990s, however, she once more lost contact and has not heard from them since. Her assumption is that her sister’s husband is now dead; she did not indicate why. She still had a belief that her sister might be alive; the matter of the severing of relations during the breakup of the Soviet Union or

of the consequent famine in North Korea – with North Hamgyeong province having been one of the most severely hit regions¹¹ – was not discussed.

Valentina's older brother had been a truck driver transporting oil, but had recently moved to South Korea with his wife – also Korean Russian – whilst their children live in Moscow. Her sister-in-law has encouraged Valentina to move to South Korea but she does not want to. She has, however, independently visited South Korea twice; during the more recent trip she attended a Christian church of the Seventh-day Adventist (제7일안식일 예수재림교회) denomination where she received a Russian Bible but she does not take it seriously.

Valentina also had a younger brother, born 1956, who died in 2009; his children live in Khabarovsk. Valentina's closest friends, meanwhile, all live in Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk; in the north, she knows only one other continental Russian Korean living in Okha.

Valentina lived in a material manner that could be immediately recognized as “Korean”. In particular, after her mother's death, she had redecorated the house with help from her brother in a consciously modern Korean style using materials from South Korea (though she called it “Euro-remont”), short only of *ondol* underfloor heating. She grows a substantial number of vegetables in her immaculate garden and large green house including staples such as cabbages, cucumber, and red peppers; she enjoys fishing, particularly in winter. In this manner she has maintained a noticeably high standard of living believing quality of life depends on one's own efforts. Due to her self-sufficiency, and perhaps earlier success in Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk, she had not experienced a major deterioration of circumstances in the post Soviet era. She has travelled a little in Russia, visiting Moscow but not yet St Petersburg, and was planning a trip to Vietnam with friends from Khabarovsk in the late autumn.

Valentina considered her Korean way of life more civilized than, for example, the Nivkh who live in the same town, who she presumed lacked any ambition to improve their circumstances. Regardless of nationality, Valentina considered herself ethnically and culturally Korean but also liked her life on Sakhalin. She had not learnt Korean when she was young because she did not realize that it might have been useful in future life; she would still like to learn it but there are no other Koreans to learn from and she is occupied already tending to her garden.

11. See Haggard and Noland (2007: 62–64) for the details.

4. GENERAL CONCLUSIONS

The cases of the two families described above are most noteworthy for their aberrance from the mainstream narrative of Sakhalin Koreans, and further differ in many basic aspects between themselves. From such a small sample size, it would be foolhardy to attempt to project any overly broad conclusions but probably the most striking point borne out in all three of the interviews was the non-direct relationship between ethnic identity and language, as well as the influence of schooling both on the interviewees' acquired dominant languages and supra-ethnic cultural affiliation: for Yulia Japan; for Irina and Valentina, Russia.

From the wider perspective of Korean diaspora studies, these brief accounts can only remind us of the great diversity of personal histories created during the tumultuous twentieth century. On Sakhalin island alone, much further research remains to be fruitfully pursued.

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