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< South Korea admits to widespread adoption fraud. Here's one story

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9-Minute Listen

PLAYLIST

TRANSCRIPT

AILSAL CHANG, HOST:

Deann Borshay Liem started having these flashbacks when she was in college.

DEANN BORSHAY LIEM: These brief images of a little home in the hills, scenes from an orphanage, children running around, shoes on a rack.

CHANG: At first, she thought that they were dreams. But then she realized, maybe these were memories. You see, Liem is an adoptee. She grew up with an American family in Fremont, California, who adopted her in 1966 when she was 8 years old. These flashbacks, she thought, must be snippets from her childhood in South Korea, and they made her want to dig more deeply into her past.

LIEM: I asked my adoptive mother if I could have my adoption records, and as I looked through them, I discovered that there were two pictures, one that was of me and one that was of another girl. And yet, on the back of both pictures was the same name, the name that I was adopted with, which was Cha Jung Hee.

CHANG: In that moment, Liem realized she had been switched with another child. She wasn't an orphan named Cha Jung Hee, like her adoption documents said. She

was a girl named Kang Ok Jin, whose mother, she soon learned, was very much still alive.

LIEM: It was just a transformative moment in my life to know that I had been switched with another child - my adoptive parents knew nothing about it - and that it took all these years to kind of come to terms with the truth.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

CHANG: In the decades after the Korean War, more than 140,000 South Korean children were adopted by families living abroad. Last week, the South Korean government admitted that there are many stories like Deann Borshay Liem's. A yearslong investigation by a Truth and Reconciliation Commission found that the country's adoption agencies were responsible for widespread fraud, malpractice and even human rights violations.

LIEM: Who were our parents? Where were we born? We have a right to our identities.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

CHANG: CONSIDER THIS - what does justice look like for the Korean adoptees who were robbed of their own histories?

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

CHANG: From NPR, I'm Ailsa Chang.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

CHANG: It's CONSIDER THIS FROM NPR. Deann Borshay Liem is a documentarian. She's made films about her own story and about the story of Korea's international adoption program, so she's familiar with the malpractice detailed in the new report from the South Korean government's Truth and Reconciliation Commission. The commission's work is ongoing, and she has submitted her own case for review. My co-host Juana Summers talked with Liem about what the report means to her and other adoptees. But first, Juana wanted to know, did Liem ever confront the adoption agency about her falsified paperwork?

LIEM: Yes. So I returned to Korea in the 1980s and went to the orphanage and met the social worker who handled my case. And in fact, I made a film about this called "First Person Plural." And she basically stated that there was a girl at the orphanage named Cha Jung Hee. She had been adopted by Arnold and Alveen Borshay. All the paperwork had been signed, the money had been exchanged, and, you know, photos had been sent and letters exchanged, etc. And my parents were really excited to adopt this girl. But at the last minute, her father - her Korean father - said, no, I'm not going to send my child for adoption, and took her home. And so she admitted that she looked around. She didn't - she - what she said was that she did not want to disappoint my American parents. So she looked around for a replacement, thought I was about the same age and height and looked similar to her, and put me in her place.

So my picture was put on her passport, and they sent this second picture of, quote, "Cha Jung Hee," but it was a picture of me with her name written on the back, and then sent me as her. And the interesting thing is - and this is what I think the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in Korea is discovering - is that the paperwork was so complete that aside from these two photos, no one would have known that a switch had been made because I came to the U.S. as a complete orphan. So although I had family, and even Cha Jung Hee had a family, the paperwork was such that she was considered a, quote, "orphan" with no family anywhere in the world.

JUANA SUMMERS, BYLINE: I'm wondering what you can tell us based on your own experience and the experience of other Korean adoptees that you have spoken with about how - the turbulent beginnings that we've been talking about, how they've affected the lives of these adoptees as well as their families.

LIEM: I think just the fact of not knowing where we come from and not knowing one's origins and the inability to actually track down those origins is really difficult. I think we all want to know where we come from, and we have a right to know. Even though many of us - you know, I myself, for example, I was adopted into a very loving, caring family. You know, they provided everything that they could possibly provide for me in terms of education, caring, all of those things. And yet, I wanted to know who I was. So I think it's an existential need that we all have. And the problem with the system of sort of industrialized adoptions that occurred in Korea is that it made it very difficult for us to return and find those origins and find an answer to these questions that I think it's very difficult to live without knowing, you know, the answers to.

SUMMERS: The commission has only just begun to look into a few hundred cases. That's out of hundreds of thousands of children who were adopted abroad. And I'm just curious - what is your initial reaction to this official admission from the government?

LIEM: I think I just felt a mixture of emotions. You know, on the one hand, I felt relief that what we, as adopted Koreans, have known for many years has been affirmed by a governmental entity. At the same time, I think I just felt a lot of anger that this was allowed to happen on such a mass scale, and just a tremendous amount of grief for families who have lost children to adoption, for the adopted people ourselves and even to the adoptive families. So just - to be honest, sometimes I just feel numb about it because it's just so overwhelming.

SUMMERS: I know that several countries that received children from South Korea, they've opened their own investigations. The U.S. is not among them. Would you like to see that happen here?

LIEM: Absolutely. You know, I think there are hundreds of thousands of people who have been adopted from Korea, Guatemala, China, Colombia, India, etc. I think there needs to be an investigative effort here in the U.S. You know, how many of these children have similar experiences, falsified documents, or were trafficked? How many of us are searching? So an investigation in the U.S. needs to take place, you know, from all of these countries.

SUMMERS: So we have this report now, but I wonder, for you personally, what would you want to see? What would you need to feel a sense of justice, to feel that things are being done right by you?

LIEM: You know, I think a truth and reconciliation process isn't binding. I know one of the recommendations is to issue a formal apology. I think an apology would be fine, but I think it needs to be followed through concrete action. I think this process can lead to truth-finding and a way by which society can come to terms with some of these historical wrongdoings collectively. But I think in - really, there needs to be some concrete action. So adoptees need to have access to their records. Adoption agencies are currently transferring records to the government agency called the National Center for the Rights of the Child. That process needs to be better funded and better staffed. I think, policy-wise, there still needs to be better financial support and social support for families, you know, that are headed

by single parents, whether it's a single mother, single father, a grandparent, etc. And I think that it's time for South Korea to end international adoptions.

SUMMERS: That is filmmaker Deann Borshay Liem. Thank you so much.

LIEM: Thank you.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

CHANG: This episode was produced by Michelle Aslam and Connor Donevan. It was edited by Sarah Handel. Our executive producer is Sami Yenigun.

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CHANG: It's CONSIDER THIS FROM NPR. I'm Ailsa Chang.

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