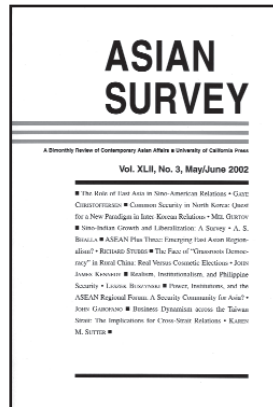


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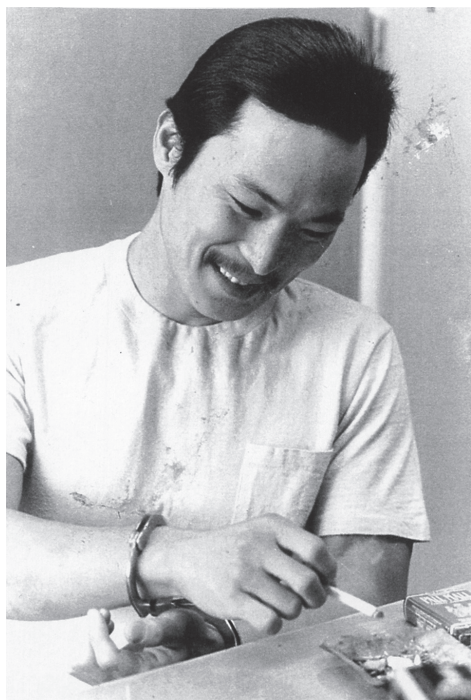
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Chol Soo Lee in his first interview with K. W. Lee at Deuel Vocational Institution, Tracy, California 1977.

Photographs courtesy of K. W. Lee



## A Conversation with Chol Soo Lee and K.W. Lee

Richard S. Kim

### Introduction

This article represents the first published interview with Chol Soo Lee. In seeking to give voice to Chol Soo Lee, this edited transcript hopes to resuscitate the importance of Lee's struggles and its relevance to our lives today.<sup>1</sup>

In December 1977, K.W. Lee, a Korean immigrant and a reporter for *Sacramento Union*, first met Chol Soo Lee, a young Korean immigrant, at Deuel Vocational Institute (DVI) in Tracy, Calif. At the time, Chol Soo Lee was serving a life sentence at DVI for allegedly murdering a Chinatown gang advisor in San Francisco in 1973. (See "Chol Soo Lee—K.W. Lee Timeline"). Two months prior to their meeting, Chol Soo had fatally stabbed a neo-Nazi inmate, Morrison Needham, in a prison yard altercation at DVI. Though Chol Soo Lee claimed self-defense, he was tried and convicted of first-degree murder in the Needham killing. As a result of his second conviction on a first-degree murder charge, Chol Soo Lee was sentenced to the death penalty and transferred to San Quentin's death row.

In January 1978, shortly after their first meeting at DVI, K.W. Lee published a two-part investigative series in the *Sacramento Union*. K. W. Lee's investigative reports on what he called the "Alice in Chinatown" murder case questioned the verdict of the first trial, bringing to light a highly problematic police investigation. The articles specifically criticized the ignorance, indifference, and racial bias of the California criminal justice system in its treatment of Asian Americans. These articles generated strong public support for Chol Soo Lee, leading to the formation of the Chol Soo Lee Defense Committee, a national pan-Asian network

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of support. In 1982, a jury acquitted Chol Soo Lee of the first murder conviction, and his second conviction was nullified on appeal. In March 1983, he was released from prison. This was the first major legal case involving Koreans in the United States. Perhaps more importantly, however, the case brought together both immigrant and American-born Asian Americans in an unprecedented pan-Asian coalition that transcended differences in ethnicity, class, political ideology, generation, and language. Despite its significance to Asian American history, knowledge about the Chol Soo Lee case has been generally forgotten or even unknown by many within Asian American Studies.

On April 19, 2005, I interviewed Chol Soo Lee, 52, and K.W. Lee, 76, in San Francisco. I have presented the interview in the form of an edited transcription rather than the “raw” verbatim transcription of the interview in its entirety. I have sought to keep intact what each individual said during the interview as well as how they said it, such as tone of voice, emotional expressions, phrasing, speech patterns, and so on. When necessary, however, I edited and rearranged portions of the text to improve clarity and meaning, and in other cases, to provide a better sense of context to what was being discussed. Despite my role in constructing a fluid narrative structure in this edited transcription, I have sought to maintain the integrity of what the interviewer and interviewees said and thought throughout the interview. The interview participants included the following individuals: Richard S. Kim (RSK), Chol Soo Lee (CSL), and K.W. Lee (KWL).

## **Beginnings**

RSK: Thank you both for agreeing to do this interview and for sharing your reflections and insights on this significant, but largely unknown, chapter in the long history of Asian American struggles for justice. I’d like to focus on the letters exchanged between the two of you, which began in November 1977 and continued until 1983, when Chol Soo was finally released from prison.<sup>2</sup> I think these letters fill important gaps in the Chol Soo Lee story, giving us a better understanding of what happened. The letters, in fact, reveal a wealth of information. The letters, for example, show the development of a strong bond of friendship between two complete strangers and the beginnings of K.W.’s investigative reports that played a large role in opening a new trial for the Chinatown killing and helping to launch a national pan-Asian movement to free

Chol Soo from prison. The letters also show how in many ways K.W. Lee was your only connection to the world outside of prison. He kept you informed of the movement's progress, which seemed to give you a greater sense of hope over time. The letters provide a rare glimpse into your life and thoughts while in prison, giving us a strong sense of who you are as a person, which I found to be very powerful and moving. I wanted to begin by asking you about how the correspondence between you two began.

CSL: I think an important part of that connection you can never forget is this woman named Ranko Yamada, who Mr. K.W. Lee met. I think she is the one that convinced him of my innocence and that is how we started the correspondence. At that point, I had nothing to lose. They say that a convict has the willpower to climb the highest mountain because the convict has nothing to lose for he is a condemned man. The only thing he has is within himself—his own personal willpower and integrity to climb the mountain . . . A convict can climb the highest peaks of the mountain. But I believe that I was lost, and Mr. K.W. Lee brought me to life in the sense that he told me that the greatest obstacles are ahead of me.

These letters, these confessions, they gave me hope, whereas I was living without hope, except for Ranko Yamada. But she had such little support to help free me for years until she met Mr. K.W. Lee. And being a convict trying to climb the mountain of freedom, he inspired me. But I cannot truthfully say that all the correspondences that I wrote to him was the full extent of what I could say as I reflect, as we get older. We can say much greater things and much more things. But every letter that he sent to me or that I mailed out was read, so I could never trust the prison officials, and so my letters were not long or lengthy but formal and short.

RSK: K.W., you sent the first letter that started the correspondence after you found out about the case. So how did you get involved or how did you hear about Chol Soo Lee? And this was in the fall of 1977, right?

KWL: It is ironic. One of my nephews is named Chol Soo Lee. So it just got to me personally. I have a Chol Soo Lee who is going to the University of Michigan for his Ph.D. And here suddenly is this Chol Soo Lee in prison. So that really hit me. You know what I mean. I never told you this [glances over at Chol

Soo Lee], but it just hit me. But anyhow, the reason why I didn't even know he was tried right under my nose was because there were so many murder cases there [in Sacramento]. So that shows that there was no support for him. Nobody paid a damn attention to him. I didn't even know that the damn guy was being tried there. Can you imagine that? I mean there are four murder cases going on, and here I was an investigative reporter yet I didn't even know. So when about four years later when I heard about this, it really hit me. That name Chol Soo Lee—it just hit me.

RSK: How did you first hear about Chol Soo Lee's situation?

KWL: What happened is that I was attending a meeting at Dr. Luke Kim's home in Davis. There were a lot of meetings at his house. Tom Kim, he was a Chinatown counselor. He was a third generation Korean kid who started a community center there. He said, "By the way, you know I feel really guilty about Chol Soo Lee. The guy was railroaded." He was involved with it, but he felt really guilty for not pushing it more. Everybody gave up. So he asked me, "Why don't you look into it?" And I thought at that time, "Wow! What is going on here?" . . . So that is what alerted me, and I started calling people. The Japanese counselor . . . do you remember that guy's name?

CSL: Jeff Mori.

KWL: Yes, Jeff Mori, so I made some calls and he also said, "Everybody is saying, what a regret." So I felt bad . . . What is use of saying I am sorry. And I am here, you know, one hundred miles away, but San Francisco is a million miles away. The people in Sacramento, they are bunch of white folk. What do they know about the Chinese, much less the Koreans? And no newspaper in American history ever invaded another town. There are two newspapers down there. And here I am in Sacramento. So everything was just like a nightmare. It felt kind of hopeless. . . Here is this Korean kid, Chol Soo Lee—this could have happened to my own nephew, and nobody knew, including myself. And that really hit me. Here you have what some call a street kid, a Korean kid, coming here and tried for murder and sentenced to life and yet I didn't know. That shows how much Koreans are out of line. Koreans didn't give a shit about him . . . Nobody cared for him. I also felt guilty too. I was an investigative reporter; I should have known. Koreans never think about people who are going to prison. You know the Confu-

cian way—anyone who goes to prison, “Well, they deserve it.” Since I came to America, I was writing about blacks so I was more open to it. But still the Koreans didn’t give a damn. That is when Koreans must look at themselves in the mirror. . .If Koreans didn’t give a damn to somebody like him, nobody would give a shit either. This is where you really have to look at the mirror.

Remember, by 1976 at the time when I heard about it, I had been a reporter for over twenty years. That really helped. Had I not been involved in the American criminal justice system, I would be utterly helpless. But at the same time, I said, “Hey, something up there, somebody up there.” It’s like as if I had trained for the last twenty-five years for this case. I felt somebody saying, “Hey, this is your turn.” If I ignored him, then nobody would give a shit about him either. So I looked at the mirror, and I said, “Hey, this is your turn because I have been writing about the blacks in the South, risking my life. And this time, it is my own kid—Chol Soo.” You know Chol Soo is like a David or Robert; it is a very common name. And here again, there is Chol Soo Lee working on a Ph.D. And here is this kid. And Koreans had no clue, including me! It was the first time I really realized, “Hey, one of us is in the prison!”

I keep talking about Chol Soo Lee, my nephew and you. Between him and the other Chol Soo Lee who is now an engineer, there is a razor-thin difference! I mean those guys at UCLA, Berkeley, Harvard, they could have become like him. He had no protection. There was no shelter for him. These things Asian immigrants don’t understand. There are many, many Chol Soo Lees right now in prison. And that is what makes me mad. There are so many of them. Do you hear anything about them in Asian America? You don’t. That is what makes me feel sick.

RSK: According to the letters, the first meeting between you two was on December 1, 1977 at DVI (Deuel Vocational Institute) prison in Tracy.<sup>3</sup> Do you recall the meeting? What was that meeting like?

CSL: It was Mr. K.W. Lee, who came with Mr. Jay Yoo, I believe.

RSK: Your lawyer was not there right?

CSL: No, Leonard Tauman (of the San Joaquin County Public Defender Office) was not there. His advice to me was stay away from the media. I’m saying, “I got no hope so when I



[pauses]. . . ” It was one of the rare visits I had because I rarely received any visitors. And I am seeing a community leader and reporter at the same time. But Mr. K.W. Lee came as an individual, as a person, not so much as a reporter to see who is this person who was accused of a murder and was framed and then accused of another killing inside prison.

RSK: Were you at first skeptical of K.W. Lee’s offer to help you?

CSL: I was skeptical, but at the same time, I knew I had to open myself fully because that meeting could decide whether there would be continuation of further meetings or it could have stopped there. And I felt that opening myself up totally would allow Mr. K.W. Lee to judge me as an individual and a person and say, “Is this person worth trying to write about? As I became totally animal in outside society, could he see me as a human being?” . . . Even though I was a little bit leery, but still it was my only chance to open up.

RSK: How about you K.W.? What do you remember from that meeting? I think you told me that you weren’t quite sure about Chol Soo Lee yourself.

KWL: No. For six months, my boss [at the *Sacramento Union*] wouldn’t let me do a story because it happened four years earlier, and it happened in San Francisco. And hell, he was convicted by a jury. So he said, “I just cannot let you go and do it because we are understaffed, and you are our main investigative reporter.” But at that time, remember I had built up a great deal of confidence in my editor. I wrote like a dog, and I was getting many awards, so that helped, you know. “O.K. boss, then I have a compromise—let me do my own investigation on my own time.” My editor said, “O.K., do your own thing.” So I was doing my own investigation without letting [Chol Soo Lee] know because I didn’t want to encourage him. I just wanted to find out more information. So I was making calls to all these San Francisco kids. I wanted to keep everything done in quiet, and I wanted to convince myself that this was real. Then you know what happened? I read the AP story that [Chol Soo Lee] was charged with a second murder. That is when I had to see him! Because I was ready to do a story on Chol Soo Lee, you know “Alice in Chinatown.” Then bang! So I had to see him because now the picture had changed; it was death, you see.

RSK: The newspaper you were writing for at the time, the *Sac-*



*sacramento Union*, was a very conservative paper. So how were you able to convince the editor to write about these issues?

KWL: It's very interesting. These dynamics very few people know about. I never talked about this. You see, there is the *Sacramento Bee*. That is the traditional white liberal paper, and my paper (*Sacramento Union*) became sort of a Republican paper. But at that time, the tide was changing. There was the civil rights movement. And remember, I had worked on civil rights issues. So, this Republican paper took to compete in a democratic city. Remember, Sacramento is democratic. So they need somebody, you see. That is why I got in. So I had bargaining power. The *Union* wanted to start competing with the *Bee* in an overwhelming democratic town, so I was no dummy. I was doing all the investigative work on the government, you know, all these exposés. But this Chol Soo Lee case is my private bargain. "Ok, I'll do all the exposés on the state and local government, but I want to have one condition, you let me do minorities." So for the first time in the *Union's* history I was covering all the minorities, you know, Japanese Americans, Chinese Americans, Filipinos, Chicanos, blacks, and prisons . . . I had been doing a lot of stuff. That is why I had already built rapport with the activists, many of them radical. So I was already writing about radicals. Then Chol Soo Lee came.

RSK: Did you have to grapple with your sense of "objectivity" as a journalist with your own personal and emotional investment, especially as you got to know more about the case?

KWL: Of course, of course. But you know I was extremely conscious of the uniqueness of Chol Soo Lee case. When you write a story, you got to follow a tight, narrow line . . . So although in this case I was really biased, I had to follow the narrow line . . . You see, I have been a minority all my life, and I was already worried somebody would pick on me because, every fucking politician, they'd love to kill me, you know what I mean . . . I was working for a very conservative paper. I could not violate any rule in my reporting so I had to follow a very narrow line. And that's why it withstood the test of time. Everything I did, I had to really back up because I worked on a conservative paper. And I am writing about some stupid Korean stuff, nobody gave a shit about Koreans. That is why it helped me too. Because every time I write a story, I know all the racists out there were watching. If I make a one fucking, pardon me [laughs], one

mistake, they will kill me. That means they kill him too. You understand? If I make *one* mistake . . . that is why my writing stood the test of time.

## **A Korean Community Matter and Korean American Identities**

RSK: This relationship between you two that grew out of your correspondences and periodic meetings at DVI marked the beginnings of what would develop into a national pan-Asian grassroots movement, which I hope we can talk about later. But early on in your letters, K.W., you wrote to Chol Soo continually stressing that the case was a “Korean” community matter, and you were very cautious not to open up any information about Chol Soo’s case to anyone outside the Korean community.<sup>4</sup> Actually, in many of your earlier letters, I was really struck how you emphasized the Korean aspects of this case as well as trying to get Chol Soo to embrace a Korean identity. What were your thoughts on doing this?

KWL: Yeah, yeah. Listen now. Because all our lives, I mean I lived it, Koreans have no identity in America because in the previous 100 years, Korea had no identity because Korea was a land that was wiped off the map; so there was no identity. So it’s very important that Koreans must come to realize that they are Koreans here. Nobody is going to give a fuck for them. In other words, the Chol Soo Lee case is the first time that Koreans had to wake up. Otherwise, what do you have at all? That is why I was emphasizing it. This was also an education for Koreans, including myself. Listen, I am not doing just for him. I am doing it for myself too—trying to find my place in America. If the Koreans don’t give a shit about their own people, especially an absolutely powerless voice like him, then what is the future of Koreans in America? The voiceless people and the powerless people must have a chance in America. And the Koreans were exactly in that position.

RSK: But you discussed earlier how the Korean community really didn’t come to support Chol Soo in the beginning. So why focus on the Korean aspects of the case if the Korean community so fully rejected him?

KWL: Yeah, that was what really upset me. In fact, Chol Soo Lee’s mom, she said, “I don’t want to talk to *any* Korean newspapers” because the Korean newspaper people treated him like

dirt, which I didn't know. And that is why I said Koreans needed education too. In America, everybody is innocent until proven guilty. So that is why the Koreans *must* wake themselves up.

RSK: Your strategy seemed to work because the letters seem to indicate that the Korean community's perspective on the case changed over time. In April 1978, you wrote to Chol Soo describing how Korean community support was building up.<sup>5</sup> So what changed? Since as you say, they didn't care in the beginning and, in fact, looked down upon Chol Soo as a street kid.

KWL: I know, I know . . . You see Koreans face tremendous cultural barriers, especially the children of Korean women. I mean that is another thing. Koreans are deeply decent people. But, they treated Korean women married to American GIs like dirt. And I was one of them too. I had that kind of wrong notion too. That's the issue, the class issue, and also the bias against Korean woman married to GIs. So it *was* a Korean issue.

RSK: You were trying to wake up the Korean community, but also trying to wake up Chol Soo as well?

KWL: That is right. Listen. I was going through my own education too.

CSL: I think one of things that the [Chol Soo Lee] Defense Committee did was that the Korean community was able to iden-



The first meeting of the Chol Soo Lee committee members in Sacramento, 1976.

Photograph courtesy of K. W. Lee

tify with my plight and life in the United States. And also my plight in Korea, and the way it was like back then. But now that things have settled, we still need identification. . . I think it needs to start not in prison. But education needs to start here, in society. And it starts all within ourselves. You could make so much, you could have so much money, you can have so much prestige. What good is all that if you cannot share, especially with the people you identify with. You say I am Korean, but Korean for who? Korean for yourself or Korean for the Korean community?

RSK: In trying to get you to embrace your Korean identity, K.W. asked you to write your life story, focusing on your experiences in Korea before coming to the U.S. And he sent you some books to help you, such as *The Grass Roof* by Younghill Kang and *Song of Ariran* by Kim San.<sup>6</sup> How did those books impact you?

KWL: Yes, Younghill Kang. Tell me your impression at the time. Because [Chol Soo] never learned any good things about Korea.

CSL: Yeah, I never had an opportunity. I knew some of the history of Korea. I have a very good memory of my years in Korea. But I enjoy history and to see *The Grass Roof* back in the days of Japanese occupation of Korea, it started to give me a greater sense of my personal integrity as being Korean. And the same time, I felt something that ate at me, which was that I was born as a Korean, and I will die as a Korean, no matter which way I may think. But I lost my speaking [Korean]. My not being able to speak it, but having to read a book in English about Korea. . .

KWL: Your childhood, don't you remember? The need to record your childhood. . .

CSL: Yes, it made a difference towards giving me more assurance of who I am and the book reflected on how you may be Korean in maybe a faraway place like Manchuria, but you can still be whole. . . I think it gave me a more wholesome idea about an identity that Mr. K.W. Lee encouraged in me—to not lose myself in the madness of a world of total insanity, the animal world of a convict, to be a better convict by educating yourself of who you are, learn a little more about your history. Every since I met Mr. K.W. Lee, one thing he always encouraged me, encouraged me, encouraged me was to write about my story.

KWL: Yeah, I kept bugging him. Thousand times.

## **Pan-Asian Political Mobilization and the Free Chol Soo Lee Movement**

RSK: I'd like to go back to the Free Chol Soo Lee movement. We have talked about how you emphasized the Korean aspects of Chol Soo's situation and how you sought to mobilize Korean community support, but one of the most important things about the movement was that it made up of a pan-Asian coalition. So at what point do you think it became a pan-Asian movement from say only a Korean community matter?

CSL: I think it was due to Ranko Yamada, who was very active with Asian Americans especially in the [San Francisco] Bay area. She drew other Asians into the movement when the Korean community was starting to build support for me. And now there was a strong base for her to reach to other Asian activists like Tom Kim, Jeff Mori, David Kakishiba, Peggy Saika, Warren Furutani. I mean right now Jeff Adachi is elected [Public Defender] official. Jeff Mori, he is the head of the Asian American Drug Recovery foundation. Warren Furutani is running for State Assembly. Art Chen, who is Peggy Saika's husband, is Alameda County medical board member. The Defense Committee members are taking over the California political system now [laughs]. They are! And Grant Din, who rode his bike [from Seattle to Oakland to help raise money for Chol Soo Lee's defense]. He is the executive director of the Asian Neighborhood Design in San Francisco. And David Kakishiba. I love him to death. He's a true warrior. He's been director of East Bay Asian Youth Community Center for some twenty years. He's been elected board member, and now he is running for empty seat of Oakland City Council. These people came all over, from New York to Los Angeles to here—their commitment to community is so strong.

KWL: Hey listen, they are noble people, man.

CSL: I think that they got to know each other [through the Defense Committee activities] and receive support even to this day with the things they are doing. And the Korean community also contributed to this Asian movement. And you know it's a great joy for me to see that. But I feel unlimited apologies to the Korean community for not being able to adjust myself into the Korean community, into the normal ways of life after my release from prison. I was so self-destructive because

[pauses] . . . I cannot criticize myself enough, but now I want to turn that criticism into more positiveness, into doing something more positive like in writing. If I am allowed to speak, as I did before, I think I can have a stronger message because I feel more purified and clean . . .

I've come to the realization that after I was freed from prison in 1983, I have failed in everything I did since I have been released. I was a great, great disappointment to all the community people that supported me. Everything I have done is my fault. No one forced me into my situation. Even, to be frank, with the Chinatown case, had I lived a positive life, like working or going to school at the age of twenty, maybe I would never got caught up in that situation where I was framed for [murder]. But, unfortunately I was living a street life, and it was the best opportunity for the police to arrest me, to frame me.

So coming out of prison at age of thirty, I was coming out like a baby. I thought I understood the normal ways of life, but I had no understanding whatsoever. I was brought out of a cage, and there was high expectation for me to do well in society, that I would somehow find a way to live a normal life. Unfortunately, I'm not blaming it on anyone, but I had no guardians—someone to guide me how to live. Fortunately, I got a job as a janitor, but it was a difficult situation. . . I was totally lost in this normal world.

And returning back to San Francisco in September 2004, I came to realize that I have been living life counterclockwise for fifty-two years, whereas normal people live clockwise. So I am just a baby starting all over again. It's been the most difficult experience that I have experienced—trying to live a normal life. A few weeks ago, I had this good fortune to speak with a Buddhist monk from Korea. . . I had a chance to meet with him. I was seeking some advice and guidance from him. He sees me as a very weak man, a very, very weak man living in a very normal society, because I'm like a baby. But in this other world, I am a very, very strong man because that's the only world I've known for all these years. . .

In returning [to San Francisco], I am just totally isolated. I'm in the process of trying to reflect on my own past behaviors and want to contribute something positive back to not only to the Korean community but to the Asian community. I am willing to admit that yes, I have not lived up to the expectation of the

Korean community, not able to adjust to society—that after living almost like a caged animal where violence is rampant and a code of conduct that is totally different from normal society. I lived in that for ten years, where life in that struggle is everyday matter. After a few days of my release, I had a meeting with Dr. Luke Kim and his wife Grace Kim. I wasn't sure if Mr. K.W. Lee was there that day I visited. They asked me how I was adjusting to be free, and I thought I was doing well, but I didn't realize the pitfalls and obstacles that I would face, that I could not live like I was living in prison or like living prior to going to prison. I find great disappointment in myself for the years that was so much wasted. . .

I became a very disgraceful sight to the Korean community and to the Asian community because not knowing how to live in normal society, I turned to drugs for escape. I was totally involved using drugs as escape. There is no excuse for that because I was given every good opportunity to do well. And I have to take full responsibility for my actions, and now I have come back. It's been a world of solitude in returning to San Francisco because people have fears that to be around me, they might have to make compromises or wondering if I have changed my ways of using drugs . . . It is a pleasure and glad for me to say to myself that I have got away from the drugs. . . And since I have returned back to San Francisco, I decided not to have a TV, not even a radio. Only thing I am doing now is just reading.

RSK: Newspapers?

CSL: No, books. I am trying to erase doubts that I can write an autobiography. As I have been reading, I put the book down, and I start writing. I got about one tablet at home right now, just writing about different parts of the prison life and stuff like that. I have a little more confidence to erase doubts whether I can write or not. I am starting to erase some of those doubts. And so what I am doing now is I am continuing to read, and I want write my own personal biography.

### **Being Asian in the California State Prison System**

RSK: You said you have been writing about your experiences in prison?

CSL: Yes, just different parts.

RSK: So, what was it like being an Asian in the state prison sys-



tem? In particular, you describe in your letters how you were constantly transferred from one prison wing to another at DVI and how the racial dynamics were different in each of those wings. Because you were often the only Asian around, you told K.W. how hard it was trying to be nice and agreeable to everyone all the time because you didn't want to offend or alienate anyone.<sup>7</sup>

CSL: I was not nice out of weakness, but out of firmness to get along. Remember in the early 1970s, the whole prison system was in great turmoil because you had these powerful gangs *Nuestra Familia* and the Mexican Mafia at war.

RSK: Against each other?

CSL: Yes, against each other. And then the BGF (Black Guerilla Family), a black prison gang, joined in with *Nuestra Familia* and the AB (Aryan Brotherhood) joined in with the Mexican Mafia along with some of the bikers. There was killings going on all over. And then you also have small separate prison gang, a militant black prison gang who followed the doctrine of Malcolm X and went after the prison guards more than other prison inmates. So when I was first transferred to DVI within a month, less than a month, I was put in away in solitary confinement.

RSK: Why was that?

CSL: What happened was that I had a minor scuffle with a San Francisco prison deputy while I was in San Francisco. And a month prior to going to DVI, there was a prison guard that was killed there. So prison officials said any person that had any problem with prison guards, they were just going to lock them away. All the lock-up units were dominated by the prison gangs. There was fighting going on there all the time. People were living in like cages. People had blankets up on the wall because people were making zip guns to shoot at each other. And I was totally naive to anything going on there. And I spent approximately nine out of ten years in solitary confinement called lock-up units. So I was always alone whereas the general population had about ten to fifteen Asian people, but I was never allowed to join them.

And because of the support that I started to receive from the outside, the prison officials was coming down harder on me. I was getting the treatment by the prison guards to come down on me harder. And to them, "hey, you killed a white guy (biker gang member Morrison Needham)," but they don't see that

I was defending myself. Instead of being placed back into the general population after [prison officials] cleared me of having no connections to *Nuestra Familia*, I was placed into another solitary confinement unit where all the bikers and the Aryan Brotherhood members were just the ones that attacked *Nuestra Familia* just a few months earlier.

So what am I to do? What am I to do? I had meeting twice with their [the biker gang] leader. . . just to say, "Listen, you know I got nothing against you guys. . . you know I was taken out of general population right in the middle of the gang war between the bikers and the *Nuestra Familia*." But he said, "No, we know that you know these guys, and you just came from there, from living there. We want us to give us some information." I refused to give them information. I am a lifer. Only way to get out of there was to ask for protective custody, which I refused to do.

RSK: What were the biker and *Nuestra Familia* gangs fighting about?

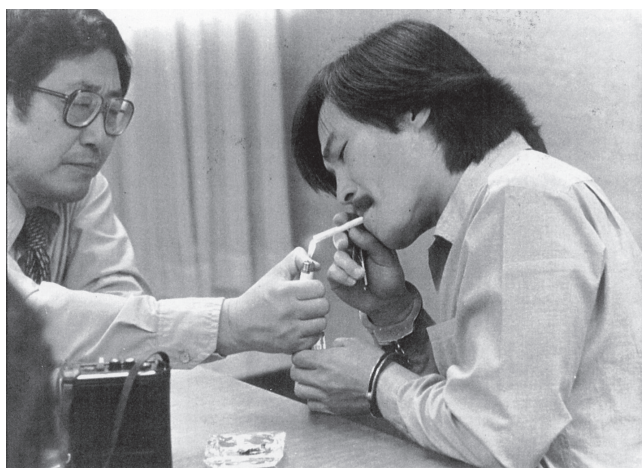
CSL: *Nuestra Familia* tried to extort the biker gangs, who were running the poker tables in the general population, to give them a percentage of the intake. And the bikers rightfully stood up for themselves. One day [the bikers] were coming back from the yard, and they got a bunch of baseball bats and went after all the Latinos they could find with the baseball bats. So the whole prison was on total lockdown. At the time, I was working as food manager clerk. And [the kitchen crew] received numerous intelligence reports that my life was in jeopardy that the white gangs were going to kill me due to knowing or socializing myself with the *Nuestra Familia*.

RSK: So the bikers thought you were a member of *Nuestra Familia*?

CSL: Not a member, but I had acquaintances with them, which I don't deny because I have known [*Nuestra Familia* members] since I entered prison. . . I mean these guys I've known from like the first eighteen months I was in prison until I was released into general population. . . And [the biker gang] wanted me to give names and list of those people that I knew [in *Nuestra Familia*]. I said I am not going to do that for you guys . . .

RSK: So racially, you were always a fish out of water and had to watch your back all the time.

CSL: I was standing on my own. Nobody knew who I was. I was standing on my *own* ground.



K. W. Lee's second interview with Chul Soo Lee at Deuel, 1978.

Photograph courtesy of K. W. Lee

RSK: So there was no Asian gang as alleged by the prosecutor, Kenneth Meleyco, in your Stockton trial for the killing of Morrison Needham?

CSL: No, there was no Asian gang. If there was Asian gang, I was the only Asian gang member [laughs].

KWL: That's right [laughs]. You see Meleyco said there was Asian gang. You know how prison is. . . I talked to all the prison officials. They are laughing because the convicts, they always talk, talk, talk, talk. But tell us, how many Asians were there?

CSL: There was about twenty Asians out of the 1,200 to 1,500 population. . . And most of them were in the general population. But being so few, we would not submit to any gangs. We would have to stand on our own. I used to say to younger Asians when they came in—you have to do two things. First thing is to be twice as aggressive as other races are. You have to protect yourself. [Second] to be twice as smart as other guys, to stay out of their problems. If you get one of us involved, you may get all of us involved. So individual survival depends on survival of the whole. And fortunately there was no retaliation against Asians because of my actions against the bikers, while I was in the hole.

RSK: You mentioned that most of your time in prison was spent in solitary confinement. So most of your correspondences to K.W. Lee were written under those conditions? I remember reading in one of your letters to K.W. saying that we're allowed out the cell for no more than one hour once a day.

CSL: Yeah, yeah. When I went to San Quentin, I was not even

allowed to exercise with the other inmates. For the first four or five months I was there, I was allowed anywhere from twenty minutes to one hour exercise in the shower room . . . In San Quentin, they gave me the worst possible treatment they could give me. When I was in solitary confinement units while I was at DVI, at least I was allowed to go out with the *Nuestra Familia* gang members and BGF gang members.

KWL: Tell us what isolation was like. What was a day like? Do you remember you wrote me a letter in pencil when you were in the hole? What happened, tell us?

CSL: This prison guard I continued to have a disagreement with. So they put me in an isolation cell. They kept me there for ten days. They have double doors. They finally put a toilet in there, but they used to have a hole in the ground. And I had nothing to write with.

KWL: Describe this hole.

CSL: The hole is like. . . The hole is a prison within a prison. You got no books, no nothing.

RSK: This is at DVI or San Quentin?

CSL: DVI. And I was only able to get hold of a pencil.

KWL: What time of year was that?

CSL: That was during my trial period, from about 1977 to 1979. I was sent to the hole by the instigation of the prison guards, to intimidate me like they were going to try to beat me up. But so what? You know. I am handcuffed behind my back. So what you going to do? I finally needed to reach out to somebody. And I reached out to Mr. K.W. Lee.

KWL: How big was the hole?

CSL: The hole is about half the size of this room. . . It's about 8 feet by 6 feet.

KWL: How long were you there?

CSL: Each time you were placed in solitary confinement, you were there for 10 days without no books, no nothing. They sent me there quite a few times.

KWL: How many times?

CSL: I don't remember.

KWL: Anyhow, how were you able to write? Wasn't it dark?

CSL: It was dark, but you have a naked light bulb that always burns there, so there was light there. They kept the light on. And I don't know how I got the envelope and stuff like that to get that mail out [laughs].

KWL: That letter is a collector's item, man. I'm not kidding.

CSL: I'm not sure if I wrote it on a paper or toilet paper, you know [laughs]. It was toilet paper, yes, because there was no paper to write with.

KWL: That's sad, that really got to me, man . . . No, no tell me. How did you write so neatly? Oh this son of bitch, he must be spending 24 hours a day. Tell us how you did you write this so neatly, damnit.

CSL: I don't know. It's got lines underneath so I just follow the lines [laughs].

KWL: Tell me how did you write? Go on.

RSK: Did you usually write one draft or did you write several different drafts?

CSL: First time, I usually write one draft and then I go back to rewrite to correct my spelling because my spelling is real bad (laughs). And as you know, you can see from my punctuation, it is . . .

KWL: No, it's perfect.

RSK: How many drafts did you go through usually?

CSL: Second or third, but usually I would write a rough one then I would correct the spelling. . .While checking spelling, then more details come to mind and I write them down. . .so I would need like a third.

KWL: Did you use a ruler?

CSL: Sometimes I use a ruler to keep the lines straight.

KWL: Listen how long it took? How many days?

CSL: [Thinking] to myself, I just cannot remember.

RSK: Some of the letters were typewritten. Did you have access to a typewriter?

CSL: When I was on death row [in San Quentin], they have inmates who like legal research and stuff, and are allowed to have one typewriter that could be shared with the others.

## Keeping Hope and Humanity Alive

RSK: Despite the bleak conditions under which you wrote them, your letters have a beautiful, almost poetic quality about them. For instance, in a letter to K.W. Lee, you wrote, “my body may be imprisoned, but it’s I who have to keep my mind free from becoming like my body.”<sup>8</sup> What kept your mind and spirit free when everything seemed to be going against you?

CSL: I think what kept me alive was that [pauses] . . . For four years I had no hope almost, except for Ranko Yamada. And then I met with Mr. K.W. Lee and Mr. Jay Yoo and some others looking to re-examine me and the case, but also looking at me as a human being. Not just a person who was in prison, who could be guilty or not guilty, but looking at me like a human being. The spirit of Mr. K.W. Lee’s letters said “Chol Soo don’t give up hope. You are condemned so therefore to be hopeless, you will only bring more misery onto yourself. That having hope is having the greatest strength in myself, the human strength.” I think that Mr. K.W. Lee contributed greatly to my having hope, to have sense of personal integrity and dignity within me as a human being inside prison walls where there is nothing but brutality. . . For one reason or another, I have grown up by myself all my life. But for some reason, out of the cruelty, I think, our humanity comes forth better because when you are so confined as a human, you totally become an immediate animal or you can find something within yourself—that there is a human being there within yourself. You cannot lose that. Once you lose that, you could still be a formal human being, but you just become animal-like. . . Prison is a totally different environment. It can make a person into a monstrous person . . .

RSK: But you kept your spirit alive. It’s amazing.

KWL: Yes, it’s the triumph, man.

CSL: I think it is a triumph because of the people on the outside. Their humanity and unselfishness allowed me to keep that.

KWL: The link with the outside . . .

CSL: Yes. Without that link, I think I would be a walking psychopath . . .

KWL: That letter is just a powerful testimony to human spirit—surviving.

RSK: That is why these letters are beautiful. Their essence shows your true spirit.

KWL: Nobody can deny it; it's there man!

KWL: Hey, ask about the poetry.

RSK: I brought some poems that you wrote while in prison. I have copies here that you can have; they are archived with the letters at UC Davis. Do you remember writing these? I thought "A Silent Plea" in particular was a very powerful poem.<sup>9</sup> As a whole, the letters were very powerful in that they showed how you never gave up hope, even after you were sentenced to death. The letters and poems also show your great compassion for others. For example, "A Silent Plea" was not just about you, but about other people's suffering and pain. I was wondering if you could talk about a little what motivated you to write that poem, if you can recall.

CSL: When I was sitting in death row, I heard about this one person who tried to take his own life just before his execution. And at the time, I never saw myself as being a poet or writing poetry, but I thought I could write something down [pauses and looks at poem] . . . It's been many years since I read this poem—it's been over twenty-five years. I was locked away, living in my own personal cell. So everyday, my routine was when I wake up, roll up my mattress, eat breakfast, and start writing. And there were some times I felt like writing something like a poem, you know putting something on paper. I was confused yet encouraged to write these sentiments in some type of poem. Mr. K.W. Lee and those people who have seen them may think they are less than poem-like [laughs].

RSK: Not at all, it's a very powerful and moving poem. It's about what you overheard some guards talking about someone who tried to commit suicide right before he was to be executed, right? And instead of letting the state kill him, he decided he would kill himself. And, he slit his wrist, right? And the poem goes on to describe the cell, the pale cell as you say, became very bloody when midnight came and the prison officials came to get him. He was just barely alive, right? Well, I am just summarizing it, perhaps you can tell the story behind it.

CSL: But still they bandaged him up and still executed him [pauses]. . . I don't know if the guards or the system takes pleasure in executing somebody. The man that was executed, he



was so bloody that his arm slipped off the straps on the chair that he was on. In that condition, where's the humanity and justice that you draw the line at? I think that reflecting on my own personal self I started to write about it. . .it was something that just hit me very deeply. I wish that people sitting on the Supreme Court could see that a condemned man's pain is so painful. While I was on death row, there was like three people who committed suicide. The crimes they committed I am sure they were very heinous crimes, to be sentenced to that. And maybe there should be no sympathy for them. But again, I think we need to draw a line between our humanity and not to get so lost in encouraging revenge of that kind.

RSK: The title, "A Silent Plea," what does it refer to?

CSL: I believe the man was seeking help. He was pleading for his life, for his last chance at life, and there was no one who was hearing it. And it was like my own personal voice that I was seeking justice for a murder I didn't even commit. And I was thrown into an environment where I must live or die. . .And somehow I survived it. And the plea, his plea was the same as my plea, looking for some sense of light and justice. Whether he was innocent or not, I have no idea, but his pleas were totally ignored, and it was just silence. And that is why I titled the poem "Silent Plea" because no one was listening.

RSK: What also struck me was what you wrote in the letter to K.W. that accompanied the poem. You described what the poem is referring to—how you overheard the guards talking about this person who the poem is about. But you also wrote that you felt very fortunate at the time in that you had support on the outside so your pleas weren't totally silent but that many others on death row, like the man in the poem, had no one to hear their pleas, their silent pleas.<sup>10</sup> I was moved by the fact that here you were on death row, sentenced to be executed, charged for murdering an inmate that was an act of self-defense and should have never happened anyway because you wrongly imprisoned in the first place. But instead of worrying about your own situation, you are more concerned with the plight of others on death row. I thought it really showed your soul and compassion as a human being even during your darkest hours.

KWL: Thinking of other people. Yeah, that was the source of [Chol's] problems. He always thought of other people. Believe me.

KWL: I want to ask you, how did you learn to write poetry? Could you tell us in more detail?

CSL: I don't know, I was thinking about Korea at the time when I was starting to receive your books [laughs].

RSK: One of your poems was titled "Thinking of Home."<sup>11</sup>

CSL: Yeah, the first poem I wrote was about Korea. And. . .

KWL: On the seaside, I remember.

CSL: Yes, the seaside, the riverside. . . I think a lot of inspiration comes from the books you assigned me.

KWL: You a poet, man! [laughs] When I read them, I was shocked. I wish I could write like this.

RSK: And "Voices Arising." Talk a little about that. That is about Korean Americans involved in the Free Chol Soo Lee movement, right?<sup>12</sup>

CSL: Yes, Korean Americans and all the people that was out there that was saying we are a united voice. And that was a very, very powerful message that was sent to me inside. We are all a part of that voice.

KWL: Can you imagine if we had that united voice? We wouldn't have the 1992 riots. . . you know what happened to Koreans. Can you imagine? We never learned. If we listened to his poetry. . .

## Justice

RSK: As we are coming to the end of our conversation, I'd like to get your views on the U.S. justice system. It was the U.S. justice system that found you guilty of murder in the Chinatown case based on false and suppressed evidence, and the U.S. justice system that eventually sentenced you to death following the prison killing. But, it is also the same justice system that ultimately exonerated you, that freed you.

CSL: They had no choice but to free me because first of all I was fortunate to have Lawrence Karlton hearing the writ [of *habeas corpus*].

RSK: He was the Superior Court judge in Sacramento?

CSL: Yes, the court in Sacramento during the writ and the Defense Committee was able to get good attorneys like Leonard Weinglass to present the case, but also there were behind-the-scenes events where the judge was getting this information from the lawyers and so forth. So we got all this evidence point-

ing to this man being not guilty. So how can you not but grant this writ to him? And the San Francisco retrial, all the evidence was presented to the judge and the prosecutor was concerned if it was not so much about person's innocence or guilt, but do we have enough evidence to convict the person? And I think this is where the justice system becomes institutional rather than going after the innocence or guilt, but they went after let's get whoever we can. And let's get whoever to perjure themselves on court stand if we want to get our target. And the system that was forcefully, not forcefully, but that people demanded justice be done and to see, even to their disbelief, that they won that fight, that I could be freed from prison. Even Warren Furutani once said to me after my release, "Chol, no one ever thought you would ever get of prison!" [laughs]

How many years? It took seven years of struggle to gain that. And the lesson is that honest people can truly monitor [the criminal justice system]. We cannot monitor every person who is going to prison or arrested, but at least we can monitor a few who are arrested and that to see they receive the fairness of justice, just as they acquitted me or freed me. But the price the community paid was great. People worked day and night without pay, but they brought about a greater sense of unity that they could make the changes as Dr. Martin Luther King preached. As a whole they did it. And we have good leaders like Mr. K.W. Lee.

KWL: He said it better than a thousand fucking lawyers. I'm not joking.

RSK: Yes, this idea of gaining justice someday comes out throughout all your letters. You talk about the great injustices of your situation, but you never gave up hope and you will always talked about how justice would be attained someday. Do you feel you attained justice in the end?

CSL: No. No, I think I was crushed by the justice system. Had I been a white or black, African American, maybe they would have been some compensation to me. There was no compensation, no apology, no nothing. Even to this day, if they could put me away, they would find an excuse to put me away. So I have to watch. . . I am walking on a razor's edge for staying out of the police's way. I am trying to assimilate into the normal community, but I find that to be very difficult than to live on other side of the world as a convict. But I am proud to

be a convict. Yes, I risked all my life to reach the peaks of the mountain. As a condemned man that had nothing to lose. I have only self-integrity to go forward in my life. And I think those are the lessons that the community people have tried to embed in me since my release. And unfortunately, it took twenty-two years to get through my thick head, but it's starting come through now.

RSK: So do you feel like your life is now moving in clockwise direction?

CSL: Yes I am. I feel like I am still a baby, but I started to move toward the positive end. I wish I was given the time again to be able to express that to the younger generation—that there are a lot of good things in this life. There is a lot of beauty in this life that we can share among ourselves. It will just spread out like a flower. And. . .

RSK: Hopefully those who read this interview will see that.

KWL: What about Hintz?

RSK: You mean, Hamilton Hintz? Hamilton Hintz, who defended you during your Chinatown trial, thought you were Chinese until almost the very end of the trial. How could have that happened?

KWL: *That* really got to me! You know I was reading thousand pages of court records and to the last day, you remember the prosecution brought the arresting officer from San Francisco. And, they asked, "Would you identify the person you arrested?" You know this arresting officer points to [Chol Soo] and says "that Chinese man." There was not one objection! Can you imagine? They didn't even know you were Korean.

CSL: Hamilton Hintz was working with the prosecutor all through the time.

RSK: He was your public defender?

KWL: No, he was court appointed.

CSL: Yes, court appointed.

KWL: And you know what he told me when I went in. That is what really got me mad! I handled many, many, many cases. I know these lawyers. His defense lawyer, if I go to him and ask him that I am very interested in the case. . . if you are really convinced of his own client, he would say "Oh. I am so happy. I will help you." You know what this son of bitch said, "Oh,

you are coming here trying to sell your newspaper, huh?" That's when I really got mad. What a fucked up system! Here is a defense lawyer. Can you imagine? Then you know what he said, "You know if I were you I wouldn't handle it," as if he thinks that you are guilty. That's what made me mad!

CSL: I think Mr. K.W. Lee's strong sense of justice. . .

KWL: I tell you that got me *mad*, man. No listen man, he is more responsible than anybody to make me mad. His own defense lawyer saying, "Are you coming to sell your paper?" Can you imagine? If I was a real defense lawyer, "Oh I'm glad, Mr. Lee, you're interested in this guy." Instead, he intimated that it's a losing cause.

CSL: Hopefully there will be some positive changes.

KWL: How did you feel? Was it like a nightmare or something? Suppose I put myself in Chul Soo's skin. Here I am charged with murder. And then all the sons of bitches, they didn't even know I was a Korean. The difference between a Korean and Chinese is like a day and night! They're two different people!

RSK: Also, a Chinese gang would have never hired a Korean for a hit like that.

KWL: I am not even talking about that. The justice system is truth, nothing but the truth, am I right? We swear—I tell nothing but the truth. But there is no truth in it. I mean the judge, the prosecutor, your own defense lawyer didn't know, didn't give a shit. . .

CSL: I think any innocent person charged with murder, it is inconceivable to their own personal mind, "how could I get convicted of a murder that I did not commit?" It is inconceivable. . . I never imagined throughout the trial I would not get found not guilty.

KWL: Tell me what was going on your mind when you were in Sacramento?

CSL: I felt that justice was going to prevail! That I was going to be found not guilty. How can I even conceive how this great justice system can find an innocent person guilty of murder? It was just, just, inconceivable at the time.

KWL: Is that why when you were convicted, you lunged at the [prosecutor]?

CSL: It was just kind of anguish exploding—"No, it just can't

be!” Yeah, it’s a nightmare that was coming to reality. . . All the illusions I had about the justice system just dissolved.

KWL: And Stuart Hanlon, man.

CSL: He’s a great man. I just finished reading a biography of Geronimo Pratt, you know *Last Man Standing*. And I thought I was reading about Stuart. From law school, for over twenty years, he has committed himself to fight for innocent men in prison as he’s done for me. . . The man, he’s a white man—half Jewish and half Irish. . . But he stands among the greatest giants of lawyers that is willing to defend those who are defenseless. I don’t think in the royalties of royalties you could find a man like Stuart Hanlon in the criminal justice system.

KWL: You know what. You know what I am ashamed of. Not one fucking Korean lawyer got together and tried to pay a tribute to this guy. That is what I am ashamed of Koreans. You know that Chol Soo. You know that, I am just ashamed. What a noble man!

## Lessons and Legacies

RSK: In conclusion, what do you think is the main lesson of the Chol Soo Lee story? Why is it important for people to know this story?

CSL: The lesson of the Chol Soo Lee case—it was given with the personal integrity of unselfishness that brought unity of the people. It was total unconditional unselfishness that people wanted to help someone—not for any personal benefit.

KWL: Hey, that is incredible. This guy really captured what I wanted to say, but he can say it better. You know it is pure, pure. Purity. All those guys that I have met twenty years ago have not changed. That is a beautiful thing. Regardless of Chinese or Korean or. . . I mean, it is no accident. Chol Soo Lee brought noble people, noble people. Although they are humble guys, they are noble in spirit. Boy, they inspire me.

CSL: They are still active in the community.

RSK: In many ways, your case was a precursor to the Vincent Chin case. In Asian American Studies, we often look to the Vincent Chin case as the first successful pan-Asian political movement. But really your case preceded that in the 1970s. But what we remember now is the Vincent Chin case and that is what we teach in the classrooms.

KWL: Vincent Chin case happened because of Chol Soo Lee.

CSL: Vincent Chin case was a safer issue for Asian Americans to take up. Here is a young man at his bachelor party and gets beaten and chased down and beaten to death by two baseball bats and not even a prison sentence, but there was a fine, like they was paying off a car, like some \$500 a month. But without the movement of the Chol Soo Lee case, I don't think that Vincent Chin—you know at the time we had this sentiment against Asian carmakers. But it was a safe issue. But mine, mine was very controversial issue [laughs] as Mr. K.W. Lee said he had to walk a straight line with it.

RSK: But the amazing thing is that your story, you were ultimately freed from prison as a result of the movement. You, actually beat the system. In the Vincent Chin case, they lost their court battles for justice, right? So I just wonder why the Chol Soo Lee movement is not remembered or it's forgotten.

CSL: Maybe Chol Soo Lee forgot himself. He could not adjust to. . .after coming out of prison, could not adjust to life on the outside.

KWL: No, no, Chol Soo. I disagree with that. Vincent Chin case really started from infrastructure. Chinese American infrastructure is really powerful. There is no Korean American infrastructure. Even after Chol Soo Lee, we Koreans never learned to work together.

RSK: Even today?

KWL: Even today. That is why I am ashamed to be Korean sometimes. That's why nobody knows. Remember Chinese Americans fought from the beginning to the end. Remember, because Chinese paid for their struggles through blood and tears. Remember Chinese are the



Chol Soo Lee with K. W. Lee after his release, 1983.

Photograph courtesy  
of K. W. Lee



Sacramento Union's  
investigative reporter  
cracked the case

"True Believer" is that rare Hollywood film, a gripping drama dripping with realism. Perhaps it's because the story line is based on a true story — a lawyer overturns the conviction of a man falsely imprisoned for 10 years for a murder he didn't commit.

For one thing, the towns where the Chicanos lived were not the same as the towns where the Hispanics lived. The Hispanic were from the Valley Area, where the crime rate was high. The Chicanos were from the Central Valley, where the crime rate was low. The Chicanos were from the Central Valley, where the crime rate was low. The Chicanos were from the Central Valley, where the crime rate was low.



**REPORTER K. W. LEE** stands underneath a theater marquee advertising the new movie based on a murder case he investigated 11 years ago.

K.W. Lee in front of movie marquee for the movie *True Believer* that was based on the murder case of Chol Soo Lee that K.W. investigated.

Photograph courtesy  
of K. W. Lee

ones that got beaten from the beginning to the end. And they built tongs. You know tongs. They are powerful institutions. So it's only natural that they want to defend. And of course the other Asians got together. But because of the Chol Soo Lee struggle that went on seven years before that. And who led it? The Chinese and Japanese! And these are the ones who set the model, who set the example saying to the Chinese and Japanese, "Hey, we can do it!" That is why Vincent Chin happened.

CSL: Also if you look back on it, that Sandra Gin Yep documentary that she did on my case, it won the best documentary award of 1983—Emmy award. But when they made a movie, “True Believer” . . . it was always the white hero.

KWL: It doesn't surprise me. Do you remember "Mississippi Burning"? And how the FBI became the hero. Listen man, I covered the civil rights movement in the South. Those FBI in the South, they are like a bunch of white sheet people; they are all recruited from the local rednecks. And then to see "Mississippi Burning" and the FBI become hero.

RSK: "True Believer"—a lot people probably don't know is supposedly based on your experiences.

CSL: Well, people know it, they are aware of it, but they don't recognize that because it is so distorted, and I am sorry to criticize J. Tony Serra.<sup>13</sup> He didn't even tell me that movie was made. And he got over \$100,000 plus royalties. He didn't even send me one penny at the time when I was going through those desperate times in Los Angeles. Stuart, he called me and said, "Chol, there is a movie about you, about your story. Do you want me to sue?" I said, "Please." So he did. At first, Hollywood said \$5,000, then \$10,000. And Stuart said, "Chol, if you wait, I

can get you a lot more.” But I was very hungry at that time so I accepted that. Stuart, out of the \$10,000, he took a few hundred dollars off for paperwork, and he sent the rest to me. And Mike Suzuki, who was a Defense Committee member, he kept the money in trust for me. Unfortunately, at the time right after I got the money, my sister, she got shot in Chinatown. She was four months pregnant at the time. And the bullet hit and went through the abdomen, and she lost the baby. They published her name and address where she was living. She grew up just like me—all alone. . . She needed some money to find another place and without no reservation, I was in county jail at the time, but I asked Mike Suzuki to give half of it to Stuart so he could give it to [her].

RSK: Have you seen the movie?

CSL: Yes, I have seen it.

RSK: What were your thoughts as you were watching it?

CSL: I think it was just one big b.s. movie.

KWL: Those two white lawyers get all the credit.

CSL: You see, Stuart, who was played as that law intern. So I asked Stuart, “Why didn’t you sue either?” He said, “They made me look like a geek so I ain’t going to bother them” [laughs]. As far as the movement that was around it, they never showed that part. At the end, a couple of views, but that was such a distortion with this white person who was fighting.

RSK: So the Chul Soo Lee story still needs to be told.

CSL: Yes, you know they are other good documentaries. . . Maybe in the past I was not ready for it. But I feel that the greatest message that could be given from the Chul Soo Lee movement is that, as Mr. K.W. Lee said, is the purity, the unselfishness, the integrity of people, giving to a stranger. And I think that message needs to be brought back to the Asian community. I think we live in a world of selfishness. All the past movements, the civil rights to gain the right to attend schools and so forth and now that education is being used for “everything is for me.” We have no room to share with others. I think that if [my] story could be told, yes there is small room there. There are still deprived people, even more deprived people than in the past. The need to give today is far greater than in my own time.

## **Chol Soo Lee—K.W. Lee Timeline<sup>14</sup>**

- 1928 K.W. Lee born in Kaesong, Korea.
- 1950 K.W. Lee immigrates to the United States.
- 1952 Chol Soo Lee born in Korea.
- 1955 K.W. Lee receives M.S. in journalism from University of Illinois, Urbana, and works for white dailies in the South.
- 1964 Chol Soo Lee immigrates to the United States.
- 1970 K.W. Lee joins *Sacramento Union* as investigative reporter.
- June 3, 1973 Yip Yee Tak, a Wah Ching youth gang advisor, is gunned down in broad daylight in Chinatown, San Francisco.
- June 7, 1973 San Francisco police arrest Chol Soo Lee as he enters the rooming house where he lives.
- June 11, 1973 Chol Soo Lee stands in line-up at the Hall of Justice. Three witnesses select Lee as gunman.
- June 28, 1973 Based on the line-up identification, Chol Soo Lee is held in San Francisco for the murder of Yip Yee Tak. Court appoints public defender, Clifford Gould, to represent Lee.
- April 2, 1974 San Francisco County Superior Court moves the trial to Sacramento. Clifford Gould withdraws from the case. Hamilton L. Hintz, a private attorney, is appointed to defend Chol Soo Lee.
- June 3, 1974 Murder trial begins in Sacramento County Superior Court.
- June 19, 1974 Chol Soo Lee convicted of first-degree murder and sentenced to life imprisonment. Sent to Deuel Vocational Institute in Tracy, Calif.
- March 1977 Prison authorities erroneously classify Chol Soo Lee as member of *Nuestra Familia*, a Latino prison gang. Chol Soo Lee appeals the classification and is officially cleared of having any gang affiliation.
- June 1977 Alerted by young Asian American supporters of Chol Soo Lee from San Francisco about his innocence, investigative reporter K. W. Lee at the *Sacramento Union* embarks on a six-month investigation into what became known as the "Alice in Chinatown Murder Case."
- October 8, 1977 Chol Soo Lee kills Morrison Needham in a prison yard altercation. Lee, who claimed self-defense, later charged with murder with special circumstances calling for the death penalty.
- November 22, 1977 K.W. Lee contacts Chol Soo Lee regarding his situation and begins working for his release from prison.
- December 1977 Leonard Tauman, San Joaquin County Public Defender, assigned to Chol Soo Lee to defend second murder case.
- January 29, 1978 The first of two articles by K.W. Lee appears in the *Sacramento Union* questioning the verdict in the first case.
- February-March 1978 The continuing investigative series prompts a local drive to form the first Chol Soo Lee Defense Committee, organized by then law school graduate Jay Yoo and Davis school teacher Grace Kim in Sacramento, third-generation Japanese American college student Ranko Yamada, and third-generation Korean Americans Gail Whang and Brenda Paik Sunoo in the Bay area, leading to a national coalition of Asian American activists and Korean community groups and churches.
- June 17, 1978 Chol Soo Lee's defense team files a writ of *habeas corpus* with the

- Sacramento County Superior Court based on suppression of material evidence and the findings of the article series.
- September 15, 1978 The Chol Soo Lee Defense Committee hires nationally renowned Chicago Seven defense attorney, Leonard Weinglass.
- October 20, 1978 Hearing for petition for a writ of *habeas corpus* begins in Sacramento County Superior Court, Judge Lawrence K. Karlton presiding.
- November 2, 1978 Stephen Morris, whose witness report to San Francisco police had been withheld from the defense, testifies that Lee was not the man who had slain Yip Yee Tak.
- January 15, 1979 Trial begins on the second murder case in San Joaquin Superior Court in Stockton, Judge Chris Papas presiding.
- February 2, 1979 Judge Karlton overturns Chinatown conviction based on the suppression of material evidence
- March 12, 1979 Jury convicts Chol Soo Lee of first-degree murder for the death of Needham.
- March 22, 1979 Jury sentences Chol Soo Lee to death.
- May 14, 1979 Judge Papas upholds the verdict and confirms it, and Chol Soo Lee is transferred to San Quentin death row.
- July-August 1979 K.W. Lee relocates to Los Angeles to begin editing and publishing *Koreatown*, the first English-language weekly newspaper that focuses on Korean Americans.
- March 21, 1980 Sacramento District Court of Appeals upholds writ of *habeas corpus* and orders that the conviction for the first case be set aside.
- June 1980 Prosecution withdraws its appeals against the *habeas corpus* ruling, and instead moves to try Chol Soo Lee on the Chinatown murder case, this time, in San Francisco.
- July 21, 1980 San Francisco County Superior Court sets trial date for retrial of the first case.
- February 1982 Lead defense attorney Leonard Weinglass is forced to withdraw from case for reasons of time and health.
- May 1982 To defend Lee in the retrial of the Chinatown case, the Defense Committee had raised \$100,000 through numerous rallies and drives. Veteran defense lawyers Stuart Hanlon and J. Tony Serra are hired.
- August 11, 1982 Retrial of the first case begins.
- September 3, 1982 San Francisco County Superior Court jury acquits Chol Soo Lee of the murder of Yip Yee Tak, and its foreman joins the Chol Soo Lee Defense Committee.
- January 14, 1983 California's 3rd District Court of Appeal nullifies Chol Soo Lee's death sentence for Needham stabbing, citing the Stockton trial judge's jury misinstructions and for allowing hearsay testimony in the death penalty phase of the trial.
- February 28, 1983 The State Supreme Court rejects the prosecution's appeal against the appeals court's nullification of the prison murder conviction.
- March 28, 1983 San Joaquin County Superior Court Judge Peter Seires orders Chol Soo Lee to be released, after Lee supporters pledged property worth twice the amount of \$250,000 bail. However, the prosecution moves to retry Lee on the prison killing charge. Lee's co-counsels able to plea bargain on the Needham case. Chol Soo Lee, who had served nearly ten years in prison, is given the

credit for the time served and freed from prison.

1990 K.W. Lee takes leave from the *Sacramento Union* and serves as editor for *Korean Times*, English Edition.

1992 K.W. Lee receives life-saving liver transplant.

## Notes

I would like to thank Chol Soo Lee and K.W. Lee for their candor and generosity in sharing their experiences with me for this interview. Additional thanks to Bill Hing and Russell Leong for their support and encouragement. I am also indebted to Jennifer Feeley and Cary Cordova for their special assistance in making this interview possible.

1. Despite the significance of Chol Soo Lee's case and its high public profile at the time, scholarship on the case has been extremely limited. Available works include Derrick Lim, "Learning from the Past: A Retrospective Look at the Chol Soo Lee Movement." (M.A. thesis, University of California, 1983); Warren Furutani, "Chol Soo Lee: Freedom without Justice?" *Amerasia Journal* 10:2 (1983): 73-88; and Sojin Kim, "The Chol Soo Lee Movement" in Brian Niiya, ed., *Encyclopedia of Japanese American history: An A-to-Z Reference from 1868 to the Present* (New York: Facts on File, 2001).
2. The letters are part of the K.W. Lee Papers, 1972-1998, Department of Special Collections, General Library, University of California, Davis.
3. "Chol Soo Lee to Kyung Won Lee and Jay Yoo," December 1, 1977, Box 1:4, K.W. Lee Papers, 1972-1998 (KWLP), Department of Special Collections, General Library, University of California, Davis; and "Kyung Won Lee to Chol Soo Lee," December 14, 1977, Box 1:92, KWLP.
4. "Kyung Won Lee to Chol Soo Lee," December 2, 1977, Box 1:90, KWLP.
5. "Kyung Won Lee to Chol Soo Lee," April 4, 1978, Box 1:99, KWLP.
6. "Kyung Won Lee to Chol Soo Lee," December 31, 1977-January 6, 1978, Box 2:20, KWLP. For Chol Soo Lee's autobiographical account, see "Chol Soo Lee's autobiography," n.d., Box 1:85, KWLP.
7. "Chol Soo Lee to Kyung Won Lee," March 12, 1978, Box 1:17, KWLP.
8. "Chol Soo Lee to Kyung Won Lee," January 6, 1978, Box 1:10, KWLP.
9. "Chol Soo Lee to Kyung Won Lee," September 9, 1979, Box 1:52, KWLP.
10. "Chol Soo Lee to Kyung Won Lee," September 9, 1979, Box 1:52, KWLP.
11. "Chol Soo Lee to Kyung Won Lee," February 29, 1980, Box 1:58, KWLP.
12. "Chol Soo Lee to Kyung Won Lee," March 27, 1980, Box 1:59, KWLP.
13. Veteran defense lawyer J. Tony Serra, who represented Chol Soo Lee during the Yip Yee Tak murder retrial in San Francisco, sold the rights to Chol Soo Lee's life story, without Lee's knowledge or consent, to a Hollywood studio. Chol Soo Lee's trial and investigation served as the basis for the motion picture, "True Believer" (1989), which starred James Woods playing defense attorney Tony Serra, Yuji Okumoto as a young Korean American with two murder convictions and Robert Downey Jr. Set in New York City, the film fails to portray the Asian American community's central role in bringing about the retrial and acquittal.
14. "Inventory of the K.W. Lee Papers, 1972-1998," Department of Special Collections, General Library, University of California, Davis.