# **A Biographical Overview of Dr. Sammy Lee** (Written by Dr. John Park)

Dr. Sammy Lee had a remarkable life. He was born in Fresno, California, when the state was still heavily segregated by race, but he nevertheless became an officer in the United States Army, and then a distinguished Olympic athlete as an elite diver, first in the Summer games in London in 1948 and again in Helsinki in 1952. He went on to a notable career as a surgeon and physician, as well as an influential diving coach based in Orange County, California. Dr. Lee would serve as an important representative for the United States during the Cold War, and he would also identify and coach other elite Olympic divers over several decades. His life unfolded during the expansion of American military power in the Pacific, and although he experienced white supremacist discrimination throughout his life, he became a new kind of American citizen, one who represented a more progressive and inclusive multiracial nation.

Even before he was born, American citizens had re-shaped the lives of his parents and of his ancestral country. His father, Soon Kee Rhee, had been working as a translator for an American engineering firm engaged in railroad construction—the sovereign monarch of Korea, King Kojong, had granted these “concessions” to foreign companies to strengthen and to develop his country, as other great powers, including Russia, Japan, and China, continued to compete for influence in the Korean court. King Kojong received American missionaries, businessmen, and diplomats to develop ties between Korea and the United States, and this was how Soon Kee Rhee became an indirect beneficiary of these policies to “open” Korea to foreign influence and to strengthen it through modernization.1

 Rhee used this position to leave Korea, just like many hundreds of thousands of Koreans in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Unlike many Korean Christians who went to Hawaii during this period, Mr. Rhee had asked his American employer to sponsor him to study engineering at Occidental College in Los Angeles. Mr. Rhee had married Eun Kee Rhee in Korea before migrating to the United States in 1905, the same year that Korea became a protectorate of the Empire of Japan. Although he’d planned to return to Korea, Mr. Rhee feared that his country would soon cease to exist, and so he eventually decided to ask his wife to join him in California. And Mr. Rhee never completed his engineering degree—instead, he and Ms. Rhee relocated to the California Central Valley, where they would work on a farm over several years. Their two daughters, Dolly and Mary, were born in 1914 and 1915; Sammy was born in 1920.2

The Rhee children were born during a period of intense hostility against persons of Asian ancestry, a period that began in California three decades before the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. Immigration exclusions against Asians had expanded over the next four decades: in 1907, for example, under the Gentlemen’s Agreement between the United States and the Empire of Japan, both countries agreed to restrict emigration to the other; and under the Immigration Act of 1917, the United States Congress declared all immigration from Asia

unlawful, and it defined as “Asiatic Barred Zone” to map, visually, all persons excluded under the law. In the state of California, legislators approved of a wide range of discriminatory rules, including the Alien Land Laws, first in 1913 by statute, and then in 1920 through a statewide referendum. These rules barred “aliens ineligible for citizenship” from owning or leasing land—the provisions in 1920 allowed public officials the right to seize lands from any Asian immigrant found in violation of the rule. And since 1878, under federal precedents, Asian immigrants were “non-white,” and thus ineligible to apply for American citizenship.

Moreover, in 1927, the United States Supreme Court said again that Asians were “yellow,” and thus “colored” and “non-white,” and subject to segregation in public services, including public school systems. California had long been a center for this kind of anti-Asian white supremacy since the mid 19th century, and so it’s no wonder that Sammy Lee felt this animosity even as a child.3

By 1932, the family had relocated to Highland Park in Los Angeles. The Rhee family changed their surnames to Lee, and Mr. Lee ran a grocery store while Mrs. Lee prepared meals to augment the family’s income. Her cooking proved popular, the family experienced some financial stability, but the young man did not transition well to the urban environment: Sammy described his older sisters as “good students,” and he described himself as a “spoiled brat.” He preferred sports over school, and in school, he was prone to fighting and to other behavioral issues. He recalled a number of instances when he’d attacked and denigrated Japanese kids his own age, for “stealing my country.” Many years later, Dr. Lee recalled several racial discriminations and slights that were common against people of color in Los Angeles at that time: he had enjoyed swimming and diving with his African American friend, Hart Crum, for example, but the boys could only use the public pool on Wednesdays, as the pool was to be drained and cleaned just afterwards; Sammy learned that some of his white classmates had parents who did not want “a chink” or an “Oriental” coming into their homes; and at the family store, he overheard his father endure racial slurs and other forms of abuse.4

As he grew older, he learned of more systemic legal disabilities that his parents had faced. Although he and his sisters were born in the United States, and thus American citizens by birth, he also learned from his father that his own parents could not naturalize into American citizens—being from Asia, they remained “aliens ineligible for citizenship.” They could not buy or lease land. Sammy learned that even though they’d attended public schools that were not segregated, his parents worried if or how their children could attend college. All of this could feel overwhelming: Dr. Lee recalled how, when he was in junior high school, he’d once confessed to his father that he had been ashamed of his Korean ancestry. “I wish that I could be white,” he said, if just to be able to avoid the racial slights and discriminations all around them. Even though he became popular and athletic in his teens, he was reminded in multiple ways that white people did not regard him and other people of color, including many of his friends, as “full” American citizens, perhaps not even as fully persons.5

Nativism and racism were not just problems in southern California. Issues of race, identity, and citizenship dominated national politics in the first half of the 20th century. In the 1930s, when the United States was in the midst of the Great Depression, and as several European nations were devolving into authoritarian regimes, either into fascism or into communism, American citizens were debating the broader role of the United States in such a world. Some Americans favored a greater role for the United States in global affairs, as an exemplar of an inclusive, liberal democracy; they felt that racial discrimination and white supremacy were harmful of American leadership toward those ends. Still other Americans preferred “American First,” a United States that would be unto itself, one that would pursue its own narrow self-interests without getting embroiled in global affairs and especially not in yet another world war.6

Americans were torn, divided over these issues: since at least 1907, nativists and white supremacists had supported race-based exclusions in the immigration law and in other areas of American life, even as progressive leaders in the federal government and in the states were becoming more vocal and critical of these same rules in the 1930s. Prominent families divided. The First Lady of the United States, Eleanor Roosevelt, for example, had spoken openly against racial segregation, quite often more bluntly than her husband, and when she was visiting states like Alabama, she disregarded the local custom by sitting next to African Americans. Yet when Jesse Owens won four Olympic gold medals in the Summer Games in Berlin in 1936, under the resentful eyes of the Nazi Party, President Franklin Roosevelt sent no congratulatory telegram or public acknowledgment to Owens, even though he’d sent many to white athletes on similar occasions. Roosevelt revealed later that he was fearful of losing support from the Southern Democrats, the so-called “Dixiecrats,” who also happened to be white supremacists. Throughout the 1930s, the Federal Bureau of Investigation had informed the First Lady more than once that the Ku Klux Klan was calling for her assassination, not so much his.7

As a teenager, when Sammy Lee was participating in diving competitions in southern California in the late 1930s, the United States was on the brink of another world war, and it was also a nation divided about its very character and trajectory. Sammy Lee was shaped by these contradictions: having caught the eye of Jim Ryan, a distinguished, semi-retired diving coach during a regional diving competition in 1938, Ryan trained Lee toward greater strength and precision over the next several years. A gruff and profane Irish American, Ryan coached Lee for free that entire time. Not only did Lee attend racially integrated public schools, Lee was also the first non-white student body president at the Benjamin Franklin High School in Highland Park. And yet he could not attend the prom, as it was held in the Pasadena Civic Auditorium, which did not allow people of color. These old patterns of white supremacy existed alongside new opportunities for people like Lee. Lee went to Occidental College in Los Angeles on a full scholarship, and when was he applying for medical school, he was eligible for a program financed through the United States Army, one that would pay for medical school in exchange for military service afterwards. Such programs were emphatically not available to people of color through the military prior to World War II, but President Roosevelt had changed that policy in the months after the United States had declared war on December 8, 1941.

And so, in 1942, when all of his Japanese American and Japanese immigrant neighbors were being evacuated and incarcerated into internment camps as “enemy aliens,” Lee’s Korean identity now moved him toward a different fate altogether. He and his family were not interned, his education was not disrupted. Indeed, with Jim Ryan as his coach, Lee won his first National Diving Championship in 1942, becoming the first person of color to achieve that feat. They were disappointed that Lee could not be compete in the Summer Olympic Games in 1940 or in 1944—both had been cancelled because of the war. Lee’s father passed away unexpectedly in 1943, but as Lee had promised his father to study medicine, he matriculated at the University of Southern California Medical School later that year. His mother and sisters relocated close to that campus to support him, and he finished his medical degree in 1946. Because the Army had paid for medical school, he was commissioned as a First Lieutenant within the Medical Corp of the United States Army, and he served as a medical officer through the Summer Games in London in 1948, and in Helsinki in 1952. Senior Army officers supported him whenever Lee had requested time to train for both of these Olympic games— they ensured that he had access to excellent diving facilities for his practices.8

All of that support paid off. Sammy Lee was the first American to win multiple Olympic medals in the diving competitions over two different Summer Games: he won the bronze medal in the three-meter springboard, and the gold medal in the ten-meter platform, both at the London games in 1948. In the Olympic Games in Helsinki in 1952, when he was thirty-two years old, Lee won the gold medal again for the ten-meter platform, becoming the first American diver to defend an Olympic championship in diving. That he accomplished these feats *after* finishing medical school, in his late twenties and early thirties, and during his service in the United States Army—these circumstances make his achievements all the more remarkable.

As an Olympic champion and as an Asian American, Sammy Lee was in a unique position as a goodwill ambassador for the United States in the postwar period. By 1949, the United States was indisputably a global power—the American military presence was obvious in Western Europe, in Great Britain, France, Italy, and Germany, as well as in the Far East, in Japan, the Philippines, South Korea, and in the South China Sea, between communist China and Taiwan. The postwar peace had devolved into a tense Cold War, with the Soviet Union and Communist China becoming fierce critics of the United States and its allies. These communists adversaries had pointed out that white Americans had never cared for “people of color,” the people of Africa, Latin America, or Asia, whom they’d enslaved, excluded, degraded, and segregated for many, many decades, ever since the founding of the United States itself. Even as American diplomats insisted that this was not true, or even if it was true, that it was no longer reflective of the kind of inclusive country that the United States was *aspiring* to become, they all realized that race-based segregation at home was becoming a significant liability for leaders of the United States as they sought to exercise global leadership abroad.9

Thus, when Presidents Harry Truman and Dwight Eisenhower met with Sammy Lee, when they asked him, through representatives of the State Department, to serve as a goodwill ambassador for the United States, he agreed to join other prominent people of color, including Jade Snow Wong, Dizzy Gillespie, and Rafer Johnson, to offer themselves as examples of what an inclusive American citizenship could mean. His very presence and accomplishments were to serve as visible, tangible counterarguments to the “communist propaganda” critical of the United States: Lee was of Korean ancestry, his parents had been “aliens ineligible for citizenship,” and yet he had represented the United States in the Olympic Games, he had served honorably in its military, and he was a practicing physician whose medical training had been financed by the American government. In short, his very life suggested that the Americans were not like the Nazis.

In photographs from this period, Dr. Sammy Lee appears with political leaders throughout Europe, South American, and Asia, including President Syngman Rhee, the American ally in South Korea before, during, and after the Korean War. In South Korea, thousands of Koreans regarded Sammy Lee as a national treasure, even though, by his own admission, he could not quite understand the accolades and words of praise coming from so many Koreans, in Korean. He served in the United States Army Medical Corp in South Korea from 1953 to 1955. In interviews from this period, his mother, Mrs. Lee, had explained how Dr. Lee’s father had come to America to pursue the American Dream, and then how Dr. Lee himself came to fulfill that dream. All three of her children were college graduates, she said, all three were living fulfilling lives, and yet Sammy’s life was well beyond any mother’s expectations.

In her essay about Sammy Lee during this period, Professor Mary Lui of Yale explained how Dr. Lee presented as a visually stunning person—as a champion diver, he often wore swim trunks in exhibitions and in other public occasions. Dr. Lee had, by all accounts, an excellent physique well into his forties: that American diplomats and public officials were presenting him for over a decade as an American citizen was itself a striking example of how the “American body politic” was altering, to be inclusive of Asian Americans, which, at the very least, implied that the United States was no longer committed to white supremacist notions of white racial purity or white race-based citizenship. Throughout the history of the United States, the “American citizen” had been a white person, and so Lee’s body became yet another symbol of how that wasn’t necessarily going to be part of the American future. As American diplomats featured these people of color as American citizens, they implied that other people of color in Africa, Asia, and Latin America could trust the Americans to be fair and impartial, should they also fold themselves into the American sphere.

And it wasn’t all just for public display. Progressives in Congress and activists across the country saw this moment as an occasion to change American public law: in 1952, for example, Congress amended federal citizenship laws to allow Asian immigrants to apply for naturalized citizenship, a change that would allow people like Dr. Lee’s mother to apply for American citizenship for the first time in American history. Broader immigration reforms, however, would prove less politically popular: over President Truman’s veto, Congress chose to retain the National Origins system that continued to restrict immigration from Asia, and Congress would not repeal those restrictive policies until Lyndon Johnson’s presidency in 1965. White supremacists still held considerable political power. In 1954, when the United States Supreme Court announced its decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*, United States Senators would take to wearing simple buttons that said “NEVER” on the floor of the Senate, as in they would never comply with *Brown*.10

Indeed, even after the Olympic medals, Dr. Lee and his family continued to encounter white supremacist resistance in unsettling ways. In 1955, when Dr. Lee and his wife Rosalind were looking for homes in Orange County, they were turned away twice, in Garden Grove and in Anaheim, because even the newer subdivisions were still segregating by race. Despite the ruling in *Shelley v. Kraemer,* yet another influential United States Supreme Court precedent against such race-based segregation in 1948, real estate agents told Dr. and Mrs. Lee that they could not help “non-whites.” The couple drew attention to this problem, local politicians for the County agreed to form a Council for Equal Opportunity, and even Richard Nixon said that he’d been “shocked” by how the Lees had been treated. They eventually did buy a house in Garden Grove, albeit not in *that* neighborhood, and Dr. Lee ran a successful medical practice in Orange County as an ear, nose, and throat specialist until his retirement in 1990.11

Throughout that period, Dr. Lee continued to represent the United States at the request of successive American Presidents, including Richard Nixon and Ronald Reagan. And he coached: he worked with several Olympic divers, including Pat McCormick, Bob Webster, and Greg Louganis. During a time when some had encouraged female divers not to perform complex, acrobatic dives, Lee trained McCormick as she became the first American woman to win four gold medals over two consecutive Summer Games, in Helsinki in 1952 and in Melbourne in 1956. Dr. Lee trained Bob Webster using a sand pit that he’d built in his own backyard, a technique inspired by Jim Ryan’s own unconventional methods. Webster won gold medals in diving in Rome in 1960 and then again in Tokyo in 1964, becoming the first American diver after Sammy Lee to win gold medals in two consecutive Summer Games. After the 1964 Olympics in Tokyo, Dr. Lee had invited several members of the Japanese national team to his home in Orange County, to practice and to coach all of them; he suggested that he did this “to atone” for his own “poor behavior” toward those Japanese kids of his youth. In the early 1970s, Sammy Lee coached Greg Louganis, and the young man eventually moved into the Lee family home to use the pool and that sand pit. Louganis would become one of the most decorated American Olympians ever—Louganis won five Olympic medals, including four gold medals, over three consecutive Summer Games, in Montreal in 1976, in Los Angeles in 1984, and in Seoul in 1988.

Toward the end of his life, after he stopped practicing medicine in 1990, Dr. Sammy Lee suffered from dementia and heart disease, and he retired from public life in his mid-seventies. He was by then among the most distinguished and decorated athletes of the 20th century: Sammy Lee won the James E. Sullivan Award in 1953, given to the most distinguished amateur athlete in the United States, and he was inducted into the International Swimming Hall of Fame in 1968 and into the United States Olympic Hall of Fame in 1990. The City of Los Angeles dedicated a corner of Koreatown—on Olympic and Normandie—the Sammy Lee Square in 2010, and the Los Angeles Unified School District named an elementary school after him in 2013. He passed away at his home in Newport Beach in December 2016, when he was ninety-six years old.

Endnotes

1 For a history of Korea during this period, see Bruce Cumings, Korea’s Place in the Sun (2005).

2 In the interview with Professor Edward Chang of UC Riverside, recorded in 2015, Sammy Lee alluded to an older brother who’d died as a child, but he did not mention his late brother’s name or other details about his life.

3 For overviews of American public law and of Asian immigrants during this period, see: Ronald Takaki, Strangers from a Different Shore (1990), and Erika Lee, The Making of Asian America (2016).

4 In so many ways, the details of Sammy Lee’s life resemble the lives of other important Asian Americans of this era. See, for example, Monica Sone, Nisei Daughter (2014), and Jade Snow Wong, Fifth Chinese Daughter (1989).

5 The sociologists would say that Sammy Lee suffered from “internalized racism,” the idea being that within white supremacy, non-white persons often feel worthless, and they often wish to be white, even to pass as white. We see the impact of internalized racism in public law during this period, as when Kenneth and Mamie Clark presented their “doll studies” as part of the Brown case in 1952; Kluger explains these studies in Simple Justice, in note 10, below. The idea also appears in influential pieces of literature, as in Toni Morrison, The Bluest Eyes (2007). Teachers may wish to review and to reference these other texts in both of the lesson plans outlined in this document.

6 For influential histories of the United States before World War II that explore these themes, see Ira Katznelson, Fear Itself (2014) and Charles Kupchan, Isolationism (2020).

7 In American history, the Roosevelts are their own genre. For two recent works, see Hazel Rowley, Franklin and Eleanor (2011), and Joseph Lash, Eleanor and Franklin (2014). The biographers tend to disagree who was the more influential in the marriage and even in public affairs, especially with regard to American race relations. For a history of the 1936 Summer Games, see David Clay Large, Nazi Games (2007).

8 For general, accessible histories of the Japanese American internment, see: Roger Daniels, Prisoners Without Trial (2004); Greg Robinson, A Tragedy of Democracy (2009); and Richard Reeves, Infamy (2016).

9 For influential histories that discuss these themes, see Thomas Borstelmann, The Cold War and the Color Line (2003), and Mary Dudziak, Cold War Civil Rights (2011).

10 For immigration reforms after World War II, see John S.W. Park, Immigration Law and Society (2018). For influential histories of the Brown decision, see James Patterson, Brown v. Board of Education (2002), and Richard Kluger, Simple Justice (2004).

11 In many jurisdictions, residential segregation grew worse in the United States after 1950. See, generally, Charles Lamb, Housing Segregation in Suburban America Since 1960 (2005).