5 : Through the Eye of a Needle

KANG PYŎNGJU [KANG BYUNG JU]

Bank Manager (m) b. 1910, North P'yŏngan Province

The year the Japanese took over Korea, 1910, is the year I was born, so I never knew life without them. However, the first thing of importance that I remember is the March First Independence Movement in 1919. You may wonder how a child like me at such a young age could get involved in the Independence Movement. It sounds like the claim of Kim Il Sŏng [president of communist North Korea, 1948–1994], who boasted that he was active fighting for Korean independence at an age when most children aren't even aware they have a country.

It happened like this. Chŏngju city was known as the cradle of modernization—it produced active people in many areas. And Tŏktari, our Kang clan village, is only eight kilometers from Chŏngju. In our very own church we had Elder Yi Myŏngnyŏng who became one of the thirty-three signers of the Independence Declaration. Elder Yi lived just over the hill from our village, and of course we knew him and listened to him. Those days, even the villages pulsated with energy and action.

When the Declaration of Independence document was due to arrive in Chŏngju, sometime in March, the people of our area decided to have their own rally in the back stadium of the Osan School. Elder Yi Sŭnghun had suggested the rally—he himself had signed the Declaration representing the Christian churches and also had founded the Osan High School [in 1907; see note 3, chapter 1].

On that day every man of our village got ready to participate, wearing brand-new white clothes. My sister and I—she was thirteen and I was nine—told our parents that we wanted to go with the men. Mother kept

saying no, but she gave us new clothes and even put on me a purple vest and black over-jacket. She let us follow the grownups, but the grownups kept telling us to go back, go back. So we followed them at a great distance.

We passed my mother's family home (our maternal grandparents' home) which was about twenty *li* [five miles] from Tŏktari and walked beyond that another ten *li* to where Osan School is located. We each had a Korean flag in our hand—everyone had flags. We waved our flags and people impulsively jumped up to the podium and shouted speeches about the sorrow and anger at losing our country. Somebody handed out pamphlets. I didn't understand them, so I stuffed them in my pockets.

Sister and I shoved our way right into the middle of the grownups. We saw almost no other girls in the crowd, because at the time few women did anything outside their own homes. Shouting and yelling filled the yard. Then, in straight rows, we marched toward Chŏngju station, which is only a short way from the school. We all shouted independence slogans until our voices cracked.

The railroad track coming down from Manchuria and Sinŭiju came through a tunnel just before coming into our station, and that tunnel is right in back of Osan School. The road from the school to the station crosses the tracks. Our parade of demonstrators was just about to cross those tracks when, woooooooo, wooooooooo, a train came out of the tunnel with whistles blowing and stopped right at the intersection in front of the demonstrators. Scores of Japanese soldiers in their brown uniforms jumped out of the train, formed a single line facing the crowd, dropped down on their bellies and started shooting. Tang! Tang! Tang-tang-tang-tang! The gun fire sounded so loud, we froze in terror—but the bullets weren't real. Blanks. They were shooting blanks.

A sexton from our church stood right in front of me and at the first volley of gunshots he fainted. We all wanted to flee but we couldn't leave him lying there, so we shook him and shook him until he came to. Then we all ran away.

Sister and I couldn't very well stop at Grandfather Kim's house—it was a prominent household and the Japanese watched it closely—so we went around that village and up the hill behind it. Sister told me to pull those pamphlets out of my pockets, and we buried them deep in the ground. She said, if we got caught with those things we would be in big trouble. Finally we got home safely.

After this event there was another gathering for independence in Chŏngju city itself. This time the Japanese responded with firm and ruthless tactics. They shot real bullets and injured many people.

After this, for about ten days, I stayed at home.

GOING TO SCHOOL

In our neighborhood lived Elder Cho Hyŏngjun, a scholar of Chinese classics and character writing. We considered him an "ideologue," meaning he was a visionary opposed to the Japanese rule and working actively to regain independence, both politically and ideologically. He was an educated person and because of this the Japanese military police constantly watched him as a potential threat to their rule.

Since I am the eldest son and therefore should be educated, my father and grandfather took one of the rooms in the outer rim of our Big House [the tile-roof house of the village elder] and converted it into a study room. They invited Elder Cho to be the headmaster to teach me.

Now, the Japanese had just established primary schools in larger towns and cities. One was in Chŏngju city and another was in nearby Napch'ŏn town, where my father practiced medicine.

These schools were still new and we weren't used to them. We heard stories that the teachers were so strict and severe that for punishment they used the most painful of whips made from acacia branches. For even greater punishment, rumor said they put nails through boards and rolled children over them. Of course these stories weren't true. Loyal Koreans circulated them to keep children from going to Japanese schools, all part of the anti-Japanese campaign.

The Japanese ordered county employees to fan out through the villages, round up children and force them to attend primary school. So you can imagine, while we studied Chinese characters in the schoolroom of our house, we kept one eye out watching for the child-catchers. Our room opened up to a clear view of Sŏdang Hill where the officials were likely to appear. Whenever a person with black clothes came down the hill, we all scattered and fled.

Because of all this confusion I never thought of going to primary school; I was perfectly happy with the situation as it was. Strangely enough, my father didn't seem to press me to go there, either. This seemed surprising because he had been one of the first to graduate from the western medical school in Seoul with a Doctor of Medicine degree.

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Now about this time, our home studies were interrupted by those Declaration of Independence meetings I told you about. Elder Cho's son, Cho Nakhyŏn, who later became a professor at Yŏnsei University, went to the demonstration, and the Japanese military police shot him in the leg. He limped home and badly needed medical attention, but he knew he'd be arrested if he went to a hospital. His family couldn't go to our house to ask my father to take care of the wounds, since that, too, would lead the police right back to their son. But they got a message to my house, "Please send someone to get your doctor for us," and Mother chose me, thinking that I went back and forth all the time and no one would suspect me. So I went to Napch'ŏn thinking I was only going on an errand.

That day it happened to be raining and Father said, "Yes, I will go back to Mr. Cho and will take care of his wounds, but let us go somewhere together first." I asked him where and he said, "Just follow me."

Huddled under ponchos and umbrellas, we began to walk. To my amazement, our walk ended at the school. A teacher appeared in a resplendent black uniform with gold ornaments on his collar, shoulder, chest, and sleeves, and he wore a saber at his waist. All Japanese government officials wore sabers or swords, and teachers were officials appointed by the Emperor, His Imperial Majesty.

Wouldn't you be frightened out of your wits if you were just ten years old and standing before such a magnificent uniform and long sword? Not only that, he spoke in Japanese, and I did not understand at all. Father said to me, "From today, you will attend primary school. You stay here while I go and take care of Mr. Cho." That is how I started primary school.

After primary school, my father sent me away from my village in the far north to enter the First High School of Kyŏngsŏng [Seoul], where I studied from 1924 to 1928. Nearly all of the students came from primary schools in Seoul. Out of all the hundreds of applicants, the school accepted only three students from the northern Provinces: from South P'yŏngan Province two got in, from North P'yŏngan Province only I made it in, and none at all from Hwanghae Province.

These city kids constantly made fun of us country hicks. When we arrived from the other provinces we had no uniforms; we wore *hanbok*, traditional Korean dress, whereas they came to school in modern attire. My *hanbok* consisted of a long black gown. It is not surprising that they made fun of us, because we really did look odd and out of place.

Yamatomachi, a Japanese street in P'yŏngyang, South P'yŏngan Province. All buildings are in Japanese-style architecture, with street name also Japanese, circa 1920. (Norman Thorpe Collection)

UNIVERSITY LIFE

After completing high school, I planned to attend the university. Grandfather made a strong suggestion that as first son, who would inherit the responsibility of the farms in and around the clan village, I should study agriculture. At that time, if one said *agriculture*, the first school everyone thought of was Hokkaido Imperial University in Japan. This school, founded by an American scholar at the invitation of the Japanese government, was well known for its modern curriculum in agriculture.

I was all set to apply, but my mother strongly opposed it. She was afraid for my safety in Japan because of the Japanese anti-Korean sentiments, partly caused by their mistaken idea that the terrible Kanto earthquake of 1923 was due to the Koreans—many Koreans in Japan were massacred by the Japanese following that earthquake.

So after much thought, I applied to the number one agriculture college in Korea, located in Suwŏn, and attended there from 1929 to 1931.

They said it was like going through the eye of a needle for a Korean to get into the Suwŏn College of Agriculture. The Agriculture Department admitted twenty-five Japanese students and fifteen Koreans each year, and the Forestry Department admitted twenty Japanese and ten Koreans. I graduated at the top of my high school class so I became one of the fifteen Koreans to go through the eye of the needle.

At the college everybody was supposed to live in a dormitory—the West Dorm for the Japanese students and the East Dorm for Koreans. Each dorm was self-governing. For example, for meals in the cafeteria, the food committee hired a cook and purchased food supplies. The library committee purchased books, and both the Japanese and Korean students were supposed to buy identical publications. Each dorm even had its own Ping-Pong committee. So either intentionally or unintentionally, each side did not associate with the other. We studied together in class and did laboratory experiments together, but we seldom compared notes or talked to each other. Usually we just nodded to acknowledge the other's presence. This is the kind of symbiotic relationship we had with the Japanese students.

Many teachers at this school had been very active in the Independence Movement. One faculty member went to North Korea after the Japanese were driven out at the end of the Second World War and became a Cabinet Minister in the Kim Il Sŏng communist government.

So you see, going through the Agriculture College put us in such an elite group that most of the graduates became headmasters of schools and bank managers. That is attributable in no small measure to the Confucian reverence for learning.

About three years before I entered, an incident took place at the college. Some of the Korean students decided to teach the farm children how to read and write. They also taught Korean history. These children wrote compositions, and in them wrote sentences implying a desire for Korean independence. Unfortunately, this was discovered by Japanese secret police detectives and caused an uproar.

The Korean students also organized a group called *Kaech'ŏk sa* (Agriculture Development Association). After graduation, they planned to devote their time and energy to teaching Korean farmers the most modern farming techniques. They were passionate idealists dedicated to the welfare and improvement of Korean farmers. They were willing to sacrifice their high social status with its future leadership roles and money for this ideal. The

association planned to build a demonstration farm in Kangwŏn-do, where land was cheaper and hitherto uncultivated. They wanted to invite some tenant farmers to live on this farm and actually experience modern farming methods.

Well, it wasn't to be. The Japanese police had become very sensitive and watchful of any group activity on the part of Korean students. They especially watched for anything that sounded like independence activities, especially among the leadership class of Korea which was then in college. They got wind of this agriculture development group, and harassed the members by jailing them, expelling them from the college, and, in effect, disbanding the group. [See chapter 7 for Mr. Kim's part in these activities.]

In my third year, my last year at the college, the students elected me president of the dorm. Although we had our own dormitory and took care of our own governing rules and everyday living, including food, this year the Japanese decided to act out their slogan that "Japan and Korea are one" by mixing the Korean and Japanese students in the dormitory.

Since there were many more of them than us, the school officials told us that each room would have two or three Japanese students and one Korean student. We Korean students protested vehemently, and the officials finally compromised by allowing each room to be composed of one nationality or the other, but side by side. We even protested that. Finally they said, all right, we'll alternate each hall, so every other hall will be occupied by one nationality.

Throughout all this controversy and conflict, I moved back and forth between the Japanese officials and the Korean students. It was not an easy task but finally it was resolved. We gave in on two things. First, we agreed to share the same library with the Japanese students, and second, we agreed to bathe in the same bathroom. The bathing was required every day because we returned from the farm laboratory hot, tired, and dirty.

In all those three years, though we studied side by side, we never socialized together. The separation between Japanese and Korean students remained thorough and complete.

RETURN TO THE FAR NORTH AS A BANK MANAGER

I finished college in 1932 and needed a job. I heard that the Japanese government was recruiting managers for the Bank of Agriculture, and had decided to allow Koreans to apply. This was unusual, because the current

managers were all Japanese as part of Japan's long-range plan to manage and control the farming in Korea.

The bank planned to select forty people—thirty Japanese and ten Koreans. So regardless of how qualified the Koreans might be, only ten could expect jobs. And though unqualified, thirty Japanese would be chosen. More than a thousand Koreans applied. I decided to apply.

I ranked as one of the ten Koreans selected and began an orientation course. After an accounting class in Seoul came field training in the provinces. I spent two months in North P'yŏngan Province, two months of class work and orientation in Seoul, four months in Sinŭiju right on the Yalu River, and another three months in Huch'ang, a remote city at the northern end of North P'yŏngan Province.

The base salary of a government position for a graduate of a Japanese public college was fifty-five yen a month and for graduates of private colleges (Korean or missionary) it was forty-five yen. By comparison, the county chief got sixty yen, the police chief got thirty, regular civil servants got fifteen, and policemen got only eight.

People assigned to remote areas of the provinces received an extra hardship bonus equivalent to 30 percent of their salary. Also, those living near the northern border, along the Yalu or Tuman rivers, received another seven yen. The salaries for both Japanese and Korean bank managers appeared to be the same, but the Japanese received still another extra 30 percent stipend.

My first permanent assignment was at the Bank of Agriculture in Hŭich'ŏn. My salary was 55 yen plus a 10-yen discretionary fund plus the 30 percent "hardship allowance," so it added up to 81.50 yen, which in those days was a very, very generous salary for a young man who was only twenty three or twenty-four years old. [In 1930, one month living in a boarding house cost 25 yen.]

Between my wife and me (this is before any of our children were born), we couldn't possibly spend that much money. Our cost of living amounted to only about 10 yen a month. We spent nothing on entertainment—no entertainment existed in that remote, rural location. So you see how much money we could save. We simply had no place to spend it.

What did I do with the money? I spent it on books, books, and more books. Every time we moved, the books were so heavy and occupied so much space that it gave me a headache! But a worthwhile headache. Also we bought an organ. I remember that organ! Pumping it. Can you imagine? Usually the church had one, or the school, but we had one in our own home. A good one. So we lived pretty well, and kept busy.

The bank transferred me to Chŏnch'ŏn, still in North P'yŏngan Province, in 1941, the year [the United States officially joined] the Second World War. The Japanese officials there had became rather complacent and tolerant toward Koreans. Also the town, although big, was quite out of the way. So both publicly in my job, and privately with my family, life there was most pleasant.

Nearly everything was rationed in those days, even in our peaceful, remote corner. Rice, clothing, cloth, liquor—everything. But while we lived in Chŏnch'ŏn (1941–1944) we managed not to be short of anything because we had a family friend, also named Kang. A very wealthy man. He helped us. He gave gifts to the Japanese to placate them, so they allowed him to keep his wealth.

MAKING COLD NOODLES

Winters were harsh that far north, and there weren't many outside activities because of the weather. What I remember most is the women getting together to make *naeng myŏn* (cold noodles). We made everything from scratch. We made the dough. We made the noodles. We plucked the pheasant. We got the condiments. All that work, to eat it as a special nightcap served after several rounds of *hwat'u* (a card game).

To make the noodles we had to squeeze the dough through small holes at the bottom of a contraption—a noodle press—and the noodles fell directly into boiling water in the pot below. The press was something like a piston. To add weight to push the dough through, I would actually stand on the contraption, and it would slowly sink down. Sometimes, when it was going slowly, I would pick up my young son and hold him, to add more weight to push the noodles through into the boiling water.

You might wonder how we got all the good foods needed for the *naeng myŏn*, since it was during the war and food was rationed. Well, there were shortages of course, and things did get worse toward the end of the war, but they were still bearable. Also the police overlooked enforcing some of the rationing rules because of the other Mr. Kang. Was it bribery? I never really knew what he did, but we all benefited. Much later we heard that on the very day the Japanese surrendered, the Koreans turned against him, attacked and beat him, calling him a Japanese sympathizer. He barely es-

caped with his life. We did not see this, for by then we had moved on to another town.

A UNIQUE LEADERSHIP ROLE

All across Korea, the Japanese government increasingly tried to unify the attitude of its citizens, especially those in leadership positions. They used the slogan "One Body, One Spirit."

In order for everyone in town to actually see a tangible demonstration of our unity, the Japanese commanded all community leaders to take part in the early morning calisthenics. If they didn't, they suffered greatly for it. Only the leaders had to do this, so in the bank I had to attend, but no one else. Every morning early we would gather at the school grounds and engage in calisthenics. They called it "Spiritual Training and Exercise." By spiritual, they meant their Shintoism, which in simple terms is nothing but shamanism.

Another ritual to increase our spiritual training consisted of immersing our bodies in the river early in the morning—summer and winter. In winter we had to break the ice to dunk ourselves in. Then we must hold hands and chant the names of the many gods of Japan—and there are about eight million of them. It took thirty minutes in the water—bitter cold near Siberia, winter wind coming down—oh, it was unbearable in the winter.

On these mornings we also lined up on the riverbank and exercised. Not ordinary calisthenics. We worked our way through specially developed Shinto body movements called, in Japanese, *Misogi Harai*. Literally, this means warding off the evil spirits and at the same time worshipping and praising those spirits that protect and give prosperity.

Now remember, all the leaders in high position, school principals and so forth, all these other leaders except for me were all Japanese. Many of these Japanese leaders did not know the rituals or how to do them. In fact, only three people knew the rituals because of their higher education and background. These three were the police chief, the elementary school principal—and me. But the police chief couldn't always come because of police matters, so the principal and I alternated in supervising this ritual.

Mr. Kang's son interrupted, saying, "Father was more highly educated than any of these Japanese leaders. The Japanese leaders realized that and respected him for it. I remember, when I was eight or nine years old, that the Japanese police chief,

the most powerful man in town, always bowed low to my father. At the time I didn't know why, but it impressed me, even then."

Among the friends that I got to know well because of our official contacts were the medical doctor (a Korean) and the police chief (a Japanese). The police station stood right across the street from the bank and our house—the bank manager's job always included a residence right next to the bank. Because of the proximity of the police station and the bank, we got together often to play *paduk* ["go" in Japanese, a type of board game using black and white stones]. So you might say we became friends—as close as a Japanese and a Korean could come in those days.

That "One Body, One Spirit" slogan did not fool us, however! It sounded good on paper. Supposedly it meant that we, both Japanese and Koreans, were all children of the Divine Emperor and therefore should be treated equally. But actually, the Japanese desperately wanted to find ways to use Korean manpower, especially men from age eighteen to about forty, for their military use—by now many of their own men had been killed in the war. So we were not fooled. They wanted us to carry out their war effort.

They didn't want to give Koreans guns to fight side by side with them because they didn't trust us. So they put Koreans into the menial jobs to free the Japanese to go as soldiers. *Ching yong* (labor draft) is noncombat work, and they drafted men into this service to do assembly-line work making parts for airplanes, tanks, and military supplies, and to work in the mines—all this to relieve Japanese men to do the actual fighting.

Then came *ching byŏng* (military draft) toward the end of the war. The Japanese ran out of their own men entirely and had to make soldiers out of Koreans. They had to give us guns; they desperately needed bodies to go to the front.

During this time, my family moved away from Chŏnch'ŏn.

I EARN A DEMOTION

As the war intensified, the Japanese management became increasingly paranoid. I was promoted to the bank branch in the city of Kanggye, then demoted to the remote city of Pyŏktong, a hydroelectric boomtown far up the Yalu River. What I did to merit such a drastic demotion was to take an unauthorized trip that the Japanese considered to be highly irregular. I started from Huch'ang and went through Hamgyŏng Province through

Hŭich'ŏn and returned. You must remember that this was near the end of the war and the Japanese were nervous because they were about to lose the war, so when I got back they met me with a demotion and transferred me to a bank in the town of Pyŏktong.

Pyŏktong was truly remote. To get to that town, upstream from the dam, we took a tiny riverboat and spent all day, eight hours, putt-putting slowly upriver. This town was so remote I expected it to be quite terrible, and yet the mountains, the hills, and the river were beautiful, and when I heard a boat whistle in the distance I was overcome with the serenity of it all. Even if you weren't a poet, you would start composing poems. It was there we greeted the liberation of Korea in August 1945.

The places we lived—Kanggye, Chŏnch'ŏn, Sinp'ung—these places, though rural, were full of natural beauty. I look at these sojourns, paid for by the bank over the years, as free sightseeing tours. In that sense it was not a wasted experience but rather an opportunity for which we thank the Lord.

AN ELUSIVE DREAM—1945

Once the war was over and the Japanese left, we returned to our hometown of Chŏngju and I became bank manager there. Everyone expected that Koreans finally would regain their independence and self-respect.

I remained cautious, waiting to see what happened next. Less than a year later, in 1946, the new communist regime disbanded the Bank of Agriculture and started the so-called Agriculture Association. [To be a manager in the new association, one had to join the Communist Party, which Mr. Kang refused to do.] I resigned my post.

EPILOGUE, 1945–1986

Mr. Kang quietly moved to South Korea in February 1947 to escape the communists, and two months later his wife and five children secretly escaped in a fishing boat and joined him in Seoul. He managed banks in several southern cities, and survived the Korean War in the small town of Mulgŭm not far from Pusan, adding child number six to the family. When peace returned, he bought a bit of land in the Anyang vineyards near Seoul, and from there guided all six of his children through college. Eventually, five of the six children emigrated to the United States. The elder Kangs visited America, where Mrs. Kang died of illness in 1971 while living with their son's family in New York. Mr. Kang returned to Korea and died there in 1986.