9 : Passive Resistance

By the late 1930s, overt resistance continued only along Korea's northern border. The Righteous Armies and freedom fighters of the early years faded from view, and even the peasant protests of the 1920s and early '30s disappeared due to the increase in repressive police power and efficient communication networks. People turned to passive, everyday forms of resistance—hiding crops, feigning ignorance, conveniently disappearing—or protested in ways only slightly more obvious, singing songs with hidden meanings, taking part in labor strikes, spreading anti Japanese rumors, and, especially Christians, refusing to bow to Shinto shrines.[1]

Barrington Moore, when writing about the German workers of 1848, could just as well have been talking about the Koreans: "Misery there certainly was, and in new and disturbing forms as well as old and familiar ones. But the main fact is simply this: the overwhelming majority of those whose 'objective' situation would qualify them as being somehow the victims of injustice took no active part in the events of the period. As far as it is possible to tell now, they just sat tight, tried to make do in their daily lives, and waited for the outcome."[2]

YANG SŎNGDŎK,

(m) b. 1919, electrical engineer, South Ch'ungch'ŏng Province:

My hometown of Kanggyŏng was an important seaport. It is at the mouth of the Kŭm River, the site of the old Paekche capital, where for centuries much trade took place with China and Japan. My grandfather was a rice dealer, and in those days all the rice harvest was brought to this seaport

Oldest Shinto shrine in Korea, on a hilltop overlooking Pusan, showing the torii gate and steps leading to the shrine at the top, circa 1925. (Norman Thorpe Collection)

and then shipped to Japan. Because of the town's importance, many, many Japanese lived there.

I remember that when I was in fourth or fifth grade (1929–30) the Japanese forbade Koreans to wear their traditional white clothing, but they couldn't enforce the ban. Those Japanese set up huge tubs of water—dirty, dark water—at street corners everywhere. Whenever they saw people in white clothes passing by, they sprayed them with this dark water.

We kids sometimes played practical jokes on our Japanese neighbors. We crept out in the middle of night and dug holes outside their houses' front entrance. We filled the holes with night soil [human excrement] from the outhouse and then covered it up with clean soil. The next morning they stepped in it!

Sometimes we threw chicken droppings onto their laundry hung out to dry. That wasn't so bad. We did these things when we were in primary school. As I look back now, they certainly weren't good things to do, but we were boys and we egged each other on.

As I grew older, I found more acceptable ways to voice resistance. One thing we used was music. I first heard the song "*Pongsŏnhwa*" when I was

in technical high school. It speaks of a flower springing up to new life. The Japanese knew we sang it as an independence song, and later, after we all learned it, they banned it.

KIM SŎBŬN, (f) b. 1914, housewife, South Kyŏngsang Province:

My cousins tried to bring down the Japanese government by secretly recruiting communist activists to establish a communist government. To stay alive, they never stayed in one place.

I remember one cousin who walked so silently I could not hear him at all. Once when he came to our house, I looked at the soles of his shoes. They were a special soft material that killed the sound. I was terrified whenever they came to visit us, for fear we would be arrested, but my husband didn't seem to mind.

I also knew—knew *about*—a young woman who was really active. In my first semester of high school, 1930, the Kwangju student uprising had just started and Japanese police came all through our dorm, hunting for plotters. To my surprise, they arrested one of the girls right down the hall from me as a ringleader.

Later my father purchased a small house in Pusan so I could live there and commute to school. In those days we didn't have running water, so we went to a central well for water. One time, getting water, there was that same girl! I was so happy to see her, but she clearly did not want to talk to me—she pretended not to see me.

One day the whole Japanese police force swooped down on our neighborhood, doing a house-to-house search. I saw them arrest this girl again, along with some others. I felt bad for her. She was only two grades above me.

I don't know what fate bound us together, but years later, when my husband was transferred to Hadong city in South Kyŏngsang Province, one day someone came in to ask a favor of him, and it turned out to be this very woman with her husband. When I first saw her, I was so stunned that my heart sank to my stomach. I wasn't sure whether to welcome her with open arms or to be wary. She must have been arrested, released, and gotten married. The two of them must have been strong activists.

Christians gained the reputation of being anti-Japanese, partly because some groups refused to bow to the Japanese Emperor or the gods of Shinto. The local Neighborhood Association leaders watched those who attended church and then

harassed them, persuading them not to attend—sometimes with words, and sometimes by withholding rations cards, prison, or death.

SIN KWANGSŎNG, (m) b. 1915, farmer, North Kyŏngsang Province:

I grew up on a farm so poor we didn't even have electricity. My father was one of the first converts to the Presbyterian church in my home village. In the early days, we had no problems, but when the war came, persecutions came. The Japanese got more and more strict, and bothered us at every turn.

Our church started out with about forty adults, but every day, with all the pestering, members stopped coming. A few women continued, but soon I became the only young man. Even my brothers stopped coming.

We didn't have a pastor, so I took charge. Well, no one else would do it. I studied the Bible a bit and then led the service. After my one-minute sermon, we mostly sang hymns and read the Bible. We had only Sunday worship—no Wednesday evening and no early morning prayer time.

We had to wait until the Japanese police detective arrived to begin the service. He always sat down right in the front row. He never closed our church, but he was always there, listening, watching.

We had other problems, too. My elder brother, for example, went to a Bible school before there were seminaries. The police knew when he left and when he came back. They came around all the time to ask what he did, what he studied, and he had to report every one of his activities. The police treated him as if he was on parole, having to tell them his every move. After a while it just got to be too much to deal with, and he stopped going to that school.

My only dealings with the police were because we were members of the Christian Church. There was no other reason for them to bother with me, because I paid my taxes and I obeyed their laws.

PAK CHUN'GI, (f) b. 1914, housewife, Kyŏnggi Province:

My first contact with Christianity came in 1930 when I was sixteen. An American missionary stood under a tree and preached the gospel. His fluent Korean surprised me, and I listened out of curiosity. I felt I should become Christian, but once I got home, I forgot about it.

After I had my first two children, and behind my husband's back, I went

to church—Sin Gwang Methodist Church. When I first started attending, about 1936, we met in secret in someone's living room.

The service lasted about an hour. When we sang hymns, we sang in our minds, we didn't sing out loud at all. No fellowship. Just the service, for fear of being discovered. We never met on Sunday because it would be too obvious. We met on Wednesday evening.

The Japanese police would arrest us if they found out, because instead of worshipping at the Shinto shrine, we were believing in Christianity. Many people that I knew were arrested.

Mostly the group was women, with very few men. All of us were young, except for the preacher, a woman in her fifties. She would secretly preach the gospel and do evangelism work in the neighborhood. I owe it to her for my becoming Christian.

Nobody knew that I went there. After the war, when it was safe, it came to light. We decided to build a house, and we bought the lot and tore down the old shack. I thought it would be good to have a prayer of dedication for the new house, so I invited Pastor Hong from the newly established church. He came and gave the prayer, and that is when my husband found out. Although he would never attend services, he decided that the church taught good things, so he told all our children to attend church with me.

The injustices in the next three stories left lasting scars in the memories of the men involved.

U CH'AN'GU,
(m) b. 1916, railway worker, North Ch'ungch'ŏng Province:

About 1936 we had a young student working for us. There was a long whip in our office, and whenever this student made some slight mistake, the Japanese superiors made him stand still and they hit him with this whip, right on his forehead. I can still see him, standing there, tears running down his face. Even then I thought, why does he have to put up with this persecution?

CHŎNG T'AE'IK, (m) b. 1911, farmer, Kangwŏn Province:

Twice a year, a group went around inspecting the cleanliness of each house. People had to have their houses very, very clean. Somehow, they al-

ways made me the head of the local neighborhood cell, so I became responsible for seeing that all the houses in my group were clean.

As head of my cell, I had to tag along with the Japanese inspector. We looked not only at the house, but also the thatched-roof shed for the animals.

Well, when crops weren't good, farmers couldn't afford to replace the straw in the roofs. At one house, the thatch had not been replaced and it had rotted. We got in there, with a ceiling so low you could touch it. The inspector poked it with his prod, and since it was rotten, it all came down. Of course there were bugs in that roof, and it all fell to the floor—the rotten straw and the worms.

The inspector screamed at the owner of the house and made him, forced him, to eat the worms! I was sick. I wanted to stop him but I didn't dare say a thing. It was so insulting—humiliating—cruel. He could have fined him! But right there, he forced him to eat the worms. That is the bitterest memory I have of the colonial rule.

CHŎNG KŬMJAE [CHUNG KUM JAE],
(m) b. 1919, day laborer, North Ch'ungch'ŏng Province:

I think you never heard a story like mine! I fought with a police chief—*chief!*—and lived to tell about it.

I grew up in a farm village and finished grade four in school—that's enough, my father said. Then I worked on the farm. When I was sixteen, about 1935, I decided this really was a dead-end job, so I left home and went up to Seoul.

I got work as a day laborer, going every day to the station outside East Gate. After about four months the whole group of us moved to Hwanghae Province to lay the second railroad track from Seoul to the Manchuria border.

Up there one day, a man stopped me and asked me to work in his restaurant. He wanted me to feed the pigs and cows, but more important, he wanted me to go collecting all the money people owed him. He said his customers, people from the post office and police station, usually paid their bills once a month instead of paying when they ate. Then sometimes they didn't pay at all. The owner thought a younger fellow might get away with being more pushy and make the officers pay up sooner.

I took his job—it was easier than railroad work—and stayed with him for two years. Then one day, disaster!

You know, a restaurant keeps lots of meat and other foods. Well, a cat kept stealing from us, and the owner told another young man and me to get rid of that cat. In the middle of the night we put meat out in a trap. We caught the cat and killed it. All in secret—nobody knew—problem solved.

The next morning I went out as usual to feed the pigs in the backyard, when the local police chief came up to the fence and said, "Come here."

He took me to the police station, into his own office, and asked, "Did you kill a cat last night?"

So he already knew, of course, that I did it. I had to own up and say, "Yes, sir." Remember, I was only twenty years old and facing the chief of police.

"Do you know that it was *my* favorite cat? Since you killed my cat, I am going to kill you."

He told me to kneel down on the floor with my head hanging down. He went to his wall, took down a samurai sword, and came back to me. With both hands, he raised that sword high above his head.

He really meant to kill me! Right there! He could get away with anything, anything at all, especially with a lowly errand boy. He could make up any excuse.

I glanced up, saw the sword above my head, and panicked! I leapt up. My foot shot out. I kicked his groin. Of course, he didn't expect anything at all, so he fell over backward, all curled up. I kicked at him again and again, blindly. I struck at his head, his eyeballs.

Then suddenly, shaking with fear, I realized I was in big trouble! I fled outside. As I ran, I tried to think. Don't go back to the restaurant. Run into the mountains. I decided to flee to P'yŏngyang city, thinking it should be easy to hide there in the crowds.

I worked my way through the wilderness, mountain by mountain, far from the highway. It took me four days to get to the city. As I entered P'yŏngyang, a policeman stopped me on a routine check. He asked me where my hometown was and what I was doing now. I said I was on my way to visit an elder brother. He looked me up and down and said to empty my pockets so he could see what I had with me.

I had this and that, but I also had my savings book of twenty-seven yen, a reasonably large amount. When he saw that much money saved, he said, "That's good enough. You may go." If he had taken me to jail, I would have been finished—every police station was on the alert to catch me.

In those days, the easiest place to hide was among day laborers, so I went back into the labor gang, laying another rail track. I kept that up for several years, and sent money home to my family without putting down my address. That way, they knew I was safe but hiding somewhere. The police went to my family in North Ch'ungch'ŏng Province looking for me to arrest me, but since my family really didn't know where I was, finally the police just gave up.

When it was safe, I went home. I had to take over the farm because I became eldest son when my brother died. I learned then that I had blinded that police chief and he had been sent back to Japan.

Look at me! Even today—thinking of it, talking of it—my body trembles at the memory.