

5-26-05

Dear Oisin,

Maybe Halmoni knew that I was writing to you about our family, because just today, she sent an article about her uncle Jungsik Sul that appeared in the newspaper. I am sending you a copy. The full story behind that article is rather long.



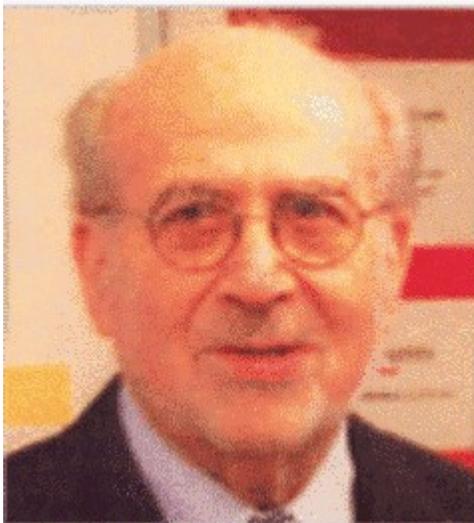
*Jungsik Sul*

Your great-grand-uncle, whose picture is the faded one on the first page, was actually a very good poet who lived a short life in Korea during a difficult period of the country's history. It has to do with the circumstance whereby Korea was divided into North and South about 60 years ago. This was just after World War II, and the reasons for the division were very complicated. Remember I told you about the Soviet Union and how the people there tried to make a country where nobody was very poor or very rich? Well, that's also what happened in North Korea. The idea that they had in mind is sometimes called 'communism.' This is an idea that is quite old. For example, the early Christians that were led by St. Peter and St. Paul were communists. Buddhist monasteries are often communist, and Mr. Blake was a kind of communist. But the word 'communist' was not really used in ancient days. In modern times, the notion became influential mostly through the writings of a Mr.

Karl Marx who, in fact, lived for a long time in London. He is rather an interesting fellow, and I will tell you about him sometime. A communist believes that essentially everything should be shared, and that the necessities of life, such as food, water, and a place to live should be divided fairly according to what you need, instead of how rich or poor you are. Such ideas, of course, are wonderful. And many people believe in them with tremendous passion. Halmoni's uncle was one of such people. Now about sixty years ago, when Korea was being reconstructed into a modern country, some people thought that it should be a communist country, while others thought that it should be an ordinary 'capitalist' country where people have private property, some people are rich and some are poor. They argued and argued, but couldn't come to an agreement. So they eventually decided to divide the country into two parts, a communist north and a capitalist south.

Your great-grand-uncle was living in Seoul at the time which was part of the capitalist south. But he believed so strongly in communism that he left home and went north to help in the building of a country where there would be no rich and no poor. Halmoni was just a little girl at the time, but still remembers how sad everyone in the family was to lose him, especially his wife and children. He thought the work of building a whole new country would be too hard for them, since many of the working people in the north had barely enough to eat, and certainly no comfortable house to sleep in. But it was too painful to say goodbye, so he left without a word in the middle of the night, like Gautama. He didn't realize at the time that he would never see them again. But that is exactly what happened. So his fate, in some sense, turned out much sadder than the Buddha's. You see, at the beginning everyone in North Korea was excited about

the idea of building a just society without hunger and suffering. But just like there are sometimes greedy priests, and a greedy Judah among the students of Jesus, there were some greedy communists. Meanwhile, because the other people were just living and working for this beautiful and innocent idea, it became quite easy for the few greedy ones to get a hold of a great deal of power. Unfortunately, that is what happens often with beautiful ideas. Their intentions are thwarted by human weakness, and by the time the ideas come to life, they are often not nearly as good as they were supposed to be. In that sense, bringing an idea to life can be like Frankenstein and his monster. In any case, soon after the greedy communists used their tricks to gain power, they turned against the good honest communists, and got rid of them one by one. That is what happened to your great-grand-uncle. After spending a good deal of time in jail, he was put to death by the greedy communists. His children in the south didn't even know that their father was dead for a long time after the event. Part of that story is explained in the article. If you look at the photograph at the bottom of the first page, you will see a smiling man with a little bit of white hair.



*Tibor Meray*

His name is Tibor Meray. He is already 81 years old. He went to North Korea as a reporter for a Hungarian newspaper in 1951. At that time, North and South Korea were in the middle of a terrible war because of these different ideas they had about how to build a country. But many people were also sick of war, and they were discussing the possibilities for making peace. Mr. Meray had gone there to write a newspaper story about the peace-talks. Halmoni's uncle was working as a North Korean interpreter. They became great friends because of their common love of literature. He recalls in the article how they spent nights together drinking Hungarian wine and discussing Shakespeare even in the middle of a war. In a war people are completely surrounded by violence and barbarism. So some might think about the fragile fruits of civilization with much greater passion than during peaceful times. Do you see what I mean by that?



*Seoul during the Korean war*

They met again in 1953 as the war was coming to an end. But by this time, your great-grand-uncle had already been severely persecuted by the greedy (and powerful) communists. He was in very bad shape and died soon afterwards. Apparently, in 1962, Mr. Meray wrote a story for a literary magazine with the title 'My memory of a poet--the tragedy of Jungsik Sul.' It was on reading that article that his family found out for the very first time that their father was actually dead. You can guess it came as a huge shock. For years they had assumed that he was living (and maybe suffering) for his wonderful ideas somewhere in the north. From then on they had to have the usual annual ceremonies in his memory, bowing to the photo of the young man their father was when they had last seen him. Three of his children are shown in the article standing with Mr. Meray. Another son lives in Los Angeles and manages a funeral parlor. You met him when you were little, but of course you can't remember.

The occasion for this article from Halmoni is an international literary forum (a big meeting of people from all over the world who write and study literature) that's taking place in Seoul right now. Haraboji is one of the organizers of this meeting. Mr. Meray came to the event and Haraboji arranged for him to meet the children of his long dead friend. They held hands and cried and cried over the sad memories they shared. Of course the children must have wanted Mr. Meray to tell them everything he remembered about their father.

Mr. Meray brought to Seoul with him a faded old edition of a book in Hungarian. He says that your great-grand-uncle was stricken with heart disease soon after he went to the north. While recovering in a hospital (run by Hungarian volunteers, it turns out) he wrote a long epic poem. Mr. Meray took the manuscript to Budapest with him, had it

translated, and published it under the title 'Epic poem of friendship.' For the children, this was the first they had seen of their father's book written in Hungarian. I am sure there are not many copies of that book remaining in the world.

[Newspaper picture]

So the Koreans in the picture are my uncles and my aunt (cousins of Halmoni). I remember the uncle on the right very well from my childhood, but the other two, I have more trouble placing. Perhaps because they were such a sad family, they weren't as often at family gatherings as the rest of my relatives. But the uncle in Los Angeles lived in our neighborhood, and I saw him now and then with his two daughters. I will translate for you the poem by your great-grand-uncle that is displayed on the second page:

Bell

Jungsik Sul

Where is it you have kept hidden  
The moans of ten thousand live spirits  
So that you sit turned away  
Keeping vigil through the night...

Was freedom bigger at least than a shadow  
And was it an eternal relic of history?  
Oh, armful of emptiness  
Ah, what is this thing that we caress...

After I am dead my people will still be,  
Waiting still for the freedom that rings itself.  
But since even then moans will be heard  
Strike the metal, soundlessly.



Today I went to King's College Chapel to attend their evening service. It's quite a beautiful old building with plenty of stained glass and carvings all over the stone walls. The painting that was hung on the wall behind the altar was a very nice 'adoration of the magi'. But the main attraction was the pretty singing of a boy's choir that ran through the service. They sang the usual prayers in Latin

Kyrie eleison (lord have mercy upon us),  
Christe eleison (Christ have mercy upon us)...

Gloria in excelsis deo (glory to god in the highest)  
Et in terra pax hominibus bonae voluntatis...  
(and on earth peace and good will to men)

Just when we were about half way through, the priest offered a prayer. I don't remember all the words, but still, the emphasis was on

`Let us pray that the hungry will be fed and the sick made whole, and pray that the wealth of the world be more evenly distributed, and that wars will come to an end.'

Good night, Mr. O.

Mr. D.

P.S. The next few days I'll be a bit occupied with the move to Germany, so I might not write until I'm there.



*King's College Chapel*