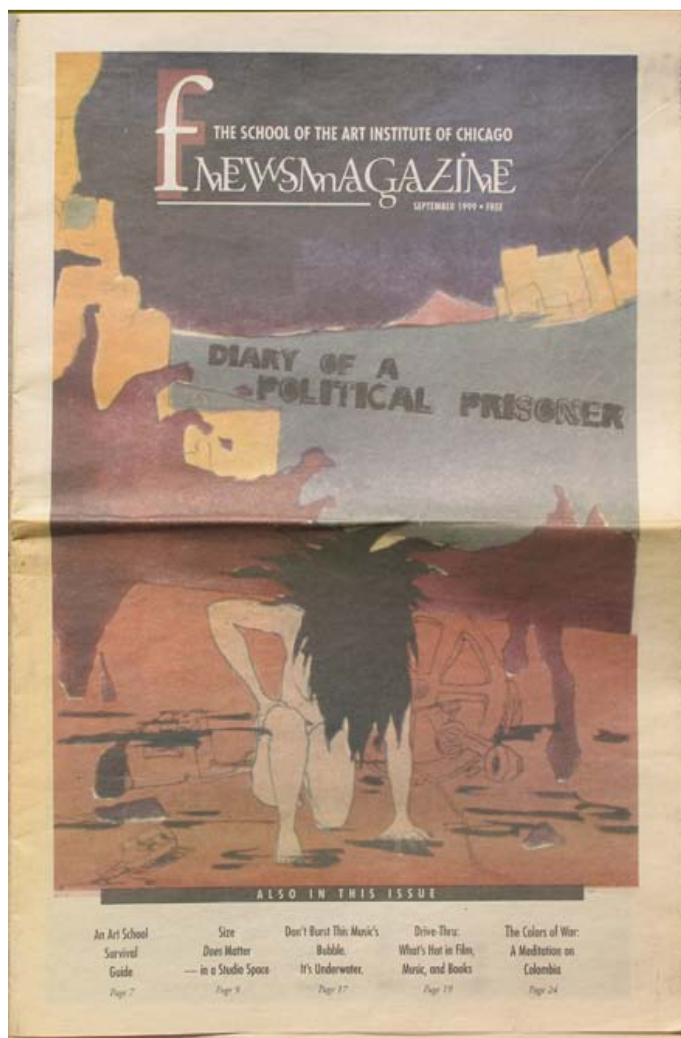


D-Day

Diary of a Political Prisoner

Seoul, South Korea

Story and art by Sun H. Choi



It was a day in the spring of 1986. There were many people who came for the college graduation celebration on campus. Two of my friends and I stayed over night at a small studio because we were planning something for graduation day. At that time, South Korea had a very difficult political situation. People knew that the government massacred about two thousand innocent people in Kwangju in 1980. Now, the government was trying to change the constitution

for the worse; for example, they tried to censor speech and writing, did not allow people to form labor unions, or to express different ideas.

The personal account of a student jailed for her beliefs

Two of my friend and I decided to let people know about this undemocratic system. We started to shout, “We are against the changing of the constitution for the worse. Allow freedom of speech and writing. Allow freedom of to form labor unions,” and “Allow freedom of expression of different ideas.”

Many students followed and echoed me; however, after fifteen minutes, over the policemen surrounded me. Finally, in just a moment, one of them grabbed my hair and two of them twisted my arms strongly behind my back. It hurt terribly, but I didn’t stop shouting. They brought two of my friends and me to a dimly lit and damp basement in the police station. By that time, my two arms were trembling and a handful of my hair had fallen out.

After five days, they sent us to different detention houses. And they sent me to the Seoul Detention Institution. My horrible prison life of four months started.

At that time, there were about forty students in the women’s prison.

Prisoners

They brought twenty-five of us from a lockup to the Seoul Detention Center. On the first night, the prison guards questioned us before we were put in our cells. “Anybody have an illness?”

Someone raised her hand. She had a heart problem; another woman said she was diabetic.

"Is anyone pregnant?" One young girl, who had been jailed with me all day in the small basement holding room, raised her hand. The prison guard asked, "How many months?" She answered, "Nine months?"

The first time I saw her, I thought she was a student like me, but she was not. She was just twenty years old. She stole a customer's pure when she was working at a restaurant. I was shocked that a pregnant woman would steal, because in Korea it is widely believed that a mother's behavior can harm the fetus.

"How many pickpockets are here?" The prison guard asked. Some women raised their

was in for, she said, "Espionage!" People started to laugh in a low voice.

Students are treated differently from other prisoners. I heard many stories about how older prisoners would keep the new prisoners at their beck and call. For example, older prisoners made new prisoners wash their feet and give them money and cigarettes. (In Korea, prisons don't allow smoking, so cigarettes are sold underground and are very expensive.) If the new prisoner didn't obey them, the older prisoners would beat them.

I was nervous when I was led into Cell 11 after midnight. Some prisoners looked at me, and some kept sleeping. I said, "Please treat me well!" and bowed to everybody. One older

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STORY AND ART BY SUN H. CHOI

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Photo: Espionage

DIARY OF A POLITICAL PRISONER

The personal account of a student jailed for her beliefs

Two of my friends and I decided to be people here after the celebration. We stayed in a room. We saw signs of the change of the constitution for the worse. I had a heart problem and I was diabetic. I was pregnant. I was a student like me, but she was not. She was just twenty years old. She stole a customer's pure when she was working at a restaurant. I was shocked that a pregnant woman would steal, because in Korea it is widely believed that a mother's behavior can harm the fetus. "How many pickpockets are here?" The prison guard asked. Some women raised their hands. "How many swindlers are here?" Some people raised their hands. "How many students are here?" Three students raised their hands. "Anybody didn't raise your hand?" One woman raised her hand. When the guard asked what she

When I was first arrested, the police treated me like an animal. I can remember one policeman heaping insults on the prisoners. He treated people like dogs. Sometimes, he made us bark like a dog, and after, he forced us to repeat "Why am I strange? Because I eat beans and rice, I am an idiot." He seemed to enjoy ridiculing us this way. The beans and rice were the typical food of prisoners.

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woman looked at me and said, "Put your rubber shoes in the rest room, and sleep anywhere!" However, if someone had to go to the rest room, people had to wale up and move because there was no extra room for walking. Nobody made

room for me to walk through the room, so I had to stand in front of the door.

Then the woman ordered me again, “Why are you standing there?” And she glared at me and yelled. Then she saw the green lines at the edge of my number plate. She said to me, “Wait a minute! Show me your number plate! Are you a student?” I said, “Yes” After that everything changed between us. She made people wake up and make room for me to sleep next to another student in the middle of the room. One of them even offered me her pillow. I slept well that night.

Most of the prisoners understood why students and workers were demonstration, and they stared to learn what the problems in the society were. The woman who helped me the first night was a boss in a pickpocket gang. Most of the pickpockets followed her orders. But she respected us for our political activity. When the students talked about political and economic conditions, other prisoners paid attention. When students and workers fought for better prison conditions (such as more time for exercise and bathing, better food and more letter-writing time), they participated in our strike. Many prisoners learned how to sing movement songs and joined our singing and shouting.

Some prisoners blamed their behavior on bad society, and they believe that the government makes them become criminals. They said, if society had given us more opportunities and had treated us well, we would have not come into the jail. If the government had let us make a decent living, we would never have ended up in prison. If some prisoners had a chance to help the students, they did it as much as they could.

When we wanted to talk to a student in another cell, we used the seven-inch wide hole our food was pushed through. Two students could see and talk to each other when they stuck their heads out the food hole. It looked like heads put on a guillotine. We used the hole for discussion, learning new songs, planning strikes, just saying hello. But then the prison guards put a small piece of wood in the hole to make it too small for our heads to fit through. After three weeks, another prisoner brought a stone to the cell and

knocked out the piece of wood. We could talk again. The prisoners could share their sadness.

There were babies with their mothers in the jail. Babies can stay with mothers until their eighteenth month. Some prisoners gave their food to the babies. But I worried about what would happen to these babies, because the first two years are so important to their emotional development. Once a week, a doctor visited the prison. I saw the woman who was charged with espionage in the morning while I was waiting for my turn. She was worried about some pimples breaking out on her face. The doctor gave her some medicines and comforted her. After I came back to my room, the prison guards didn't allow anybody to do things such as exercise, bathing, open letter writing, and interviews.

That evening, the guards told us she had just been executed. In fact, the government had sentenced her to death two years before, but tried to get her to admit her guilt and accept a plea bargain to avoid death. She refused. She had been sentenced to the death penalty for helping her brother, whom the government said was a spy. Her brother and mother lived in Japan and were members of Jo-Chon-Leon, which supports unification of the two Koreas and attacks the South Korean government.

We refuse our meals that day to cherish her memory.

A Fight For Survival

When I was in jail the first night, I said to myself, “If this is the beginning, there must be an end, too. Someday I am going to be free, and someday my country will become a democratic country.”

The view on one side of the prison was of high walls. There was barbed wire on the top of the walls. On one side was the rugged ridge line of the In-Wang Mountains. I was only a little sky, as if I were looking through the circular opening of jar. This was the image of the democracy in my country to me – that there was a limit to

democracy in my country. I wanted to see the clear blue heaven which looked after the poor and was a symbol of my hope for freedom when I was arrested. My sky was a small thread I was through a vent in the bathroom – a fine thread, but it was still there.

The prison guards called me “78.” I had a prisoner number only, as if I had no personality. Some female prison guards made us stand naked, and I had to go through body cavity searches. “Take them off!” “Sit down!” “Stand up!” Their orders compounded my shame. Some female prisoners had to take off their clothes in front of male guards. I could imagine their agony!

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What I had learned about prison from other prisoners made me afraid. However, I had to fight by myself and overcome my fear. I was afraid I would also be killed like the other students who were murdered by torture during interrogations. No one would have to know, but I believed my life would end in prison. I was still in pain from when the police grabbed my hair and twisted my arms when I was arrested. Even though my two injured arms were trembling and a handful of my hair had fallen out, what was over. I knew my arms would recover and my hair would grow again.

I stayed in a 9-foot-by-9-foot wooden room with different kinds of offenders in a detention facility. There were some pickpockets, some swindlers, someone who fenced stolen items, and another student. Fortunately, they generally treated the students more gently than the other prisoners. Usually they tricked the in-coming prisoners. For example, when they came to the jail room the first time, the senior prisoners ordered them to turn off the light before they went to bed. But there was no switch for the light in

the jail room because the guards kept the light on twenty-four hours a day to watch. After I was released and I returned home, I could not sleep with the light off for a long time. It I tried to sleep with the light turned off, I heard strange noise and felt like I was spinning.

The detention building had neither heating system during winter nor cooling system during summer. Some people had their noses, faces and ears frostbitten because the cold temperature and strong winds came in from the cracks in the wood floor. One day, when it was still cold, I had severe cramps. I asked for some pills to stop the pain, but they refused. The reason was that people could use the pills as hallucinogens. Even though I bit my lip for endurance, at last I started



to cry. I was rolling continuously on the floor and I huddled in the corner of the room.

Once a week we bathed. We had to wait in the hallway, without clothes, until the previous group finished bathing. I was so embarrassed. I felt like a naked animal. The floor was cement. It was like ice in winter. When I went to the bathroom, there was only extremely hot water in the bath. Therefore, prison guards offered cold water, but it was just one small two-gallon bucket for each person. We had to finish bathing in fifteen minutes. The first time, I put hot water from the bath on my hair. It was really hot and almost burned me. I was crying without a sound.

The biggest problem was the toilet in each room. There was just a plastic door between the room and the toilet. We had to smell excrement all the time because there was only a small wood cover on the hole. Sometimes, when I lifted the wood cover, I found a couple of big rats who had very little hair because they ate the excrement. The conventional toilet was so noxious that most people suffered from the poison of the excrement with conditions such as alopecia. People's hair fell out like the rats'.

Some of the parents of student prisoners lost their jobs, especially teaching jobs. My father was reprimanded a couple of times at his job at school. One of the saddest stories was when a student lost her mother while she was in jail. Her mother was in a serious car accident and died while she was coming to the jail to visit her daughter. I was sentenced to one year in prison with a stay of sentence for three years. After two years, a new government sent me a letter of pardon. However, they not change anything for the better. Now another new government is much better than before because it comes from an opposition party which has more democratic ideas.

Protests in The Jail

The jail was another place for protest. "Give us longer bathing time, more than twenty

minutes!" "Give us better food!" "Don't censor and erase our letters!" Two days after the protest started, our shouting and singing of movement songs diminished because we had been refusing food. We thought a hunger strike was the only way to exercise our rights in jail. One of the senior students died as result of malnutrition.

To protest the poor jail conditions, we shouted and sang in unison. In order to separate us, male prison guards were sent into the women's jail. Usually in Korea, only female guards are assigned to the women's jail. They went into the cell where the most active protesters were held. Three grabbed one student and took her to solitary confinement. After ten minutes, the guards came to our cell. Three male guards came into the cell and violently restrained me, then moved me to another cell in the basement of the building. This part of the building was named "the maintenance of public security for the jail." Which is equivalent to solitary confinement.

The building looked like a maze without enough air. It was hard to breathe in the cell. The prisoners shouted their names. "I'm Koung Jo from room four in the second building." "I'm Sook Ja from room nine in the first building and nice to meet you and cheer up!" Everyone introduced themselves and encouraged each other to stay strong. We discussed the present situation of the protest and the present political condition in South Korea even though it was hard to converse with each other. Unanimously, we decided to continue the hunger strike although the guards pressured us to eat. They placed better food inside our cell on the small and dark basement cell floor. It was hard to endure the hunger, but nobody broke the strike.

Next day, we heard Hei Soo had been admitted to the hospital. Two hours later, Mee ROUNG was admitted, and then followed by Koung Lan and Jean Hee. They came from the regular jail populations, nor our unit. The remaining students in the main cell demanded the warden bring back the students in solitary confinement. In Korea, protesters often harm themselves to make their point. Hei Soo and Mee ROUNG cut their wrists with a piece of glass they found outside. Koung Lan and Jean Hee drank

dishwashing detergent. Finally, two days later, we were returned to the main jail population. The protest resulted in a slight improvement in our conditions. That night I could not sleep because of hunger. I woke up and quietly started to eat some candy. I fell asleep after eating a large pack of candy. The injured students were returned to their cells even though their wounds were not yet healed.

We fought again for new ways of improving our prison conditions. One senior student brought up the issue of ways to protest without being self-destructive. We changed our ways to fight and started eating food and using our energy as much as we could. Two months later, on May 18, we held a ceremony for the people of Kwangju and their revolution in 1980.

“Let’s break the door! Let’s break the door!” We started hitting and shaking the door of the cell. The door was broken out after three hours because the jail was an old, wooden building. After we went out from the cell, someone shouted. “Let’s take the key and open the doors!” The grim male prison guards were ready to come in and fight. We took the key, but we couldn’t open any door because we were immediately arrested by male guards and taken to the basement cell again. During this fight many students were injured. One student, Hei Soo, fought with three of the male prison guards. Her clothes were ripped from her body during the struggle. Hei Soo was so shocked from this fight; she lost her speech for three months out of embarrassment of being naked in public.

All of the students were tied with rope normally used for binding criminal. Our arms were tied behind our backs and then tied to our ankles so that we could not stand. I was in a half lethargic condition because my blood pressure fell down very low and I felt a chill. I heard the guard’s voice, but I could not stand or walk for a month. As a result, exercise time was increased. I saw yellow forsythias and red azaleas in the mountains that were far away from the jail. The red azalea symbolizes the Kwaung Joo people who had fervent loyalty, the martyred patriots. I heard their great outcry for democracy.

The Next Step

I saw a lot of azaleas in the mountains here and there even though it was already June. My arms and wrists were badly bruised because the rope and handcuffs they used were very tight when I was moved to the Supreme Court. My body stank because of drainage and I had rashes caused by excrement. It takes at least two months for a person to change their body scent after they get released from the jail because the odor of the excrement has infiltrated into the body. First of all, I needed to recover my health. Later then, I considered what I was going to do after jail.

I couldn’t decide between working in the cultural movement and the labor movement. In my country, we called it a cultural movement when people in the arts take part in a social movement. Many people involved in cultural movements make an effort for enhancing democratic society. I agreed that a cultural movement is helpful to the social revolution, but it is a secondary movement in a dictatorship. I thought the primary movement was the labor movement because only the working class could change the power structure and become the main group in future society. Therefore, I made my decision to go into a factory.

At that time, working conditions were very poor. Factory workers might work overnight for many days. They received very small salaries even though they worked so hard. Most of the factories didn’t have a labor union to represent the workers. Some factories had a labor union, but it was a “kept” union (company union). At this time, many laborers started to politically wake up, and they realized a need for a real labor union.

I had worked in a factory for four months using a fake ID. Unfortunately, I had to leave the factory because people in my organization were arrested. That meant the identities of all the members of the organization were then known to the police. If people who have a college education get factory jobs, they are arrested. It is illegal in my country. Therefore I had to leave.

After the death of Han-Yeal Lee, a man who was killed by a direct hit of tear gas to the

back of his head, people were getting angrier and they started to shout, "We are against the military dictatorship!" At his funeral service, over 200,000 people gathered in Seoul.

After that, people protested against the government every day for a month. People's power was getting stronger, they could organize the "People's Party," and they had Ki-Whan Bak as a candidate in the presidential election. They collected money that was required for the candidate to apply for the election. It was a big amount for people, but they collected it all right before the deadline. Most of the coins were collected from laborers, peasants, students, and the people. Later we heard election polling committees had a hard time counting the money.

Ki-Whan Bak did not win the election.

But although we lost, the space for open activity was expanded. I started to work for an open labor movement group; we started a labor-political school. My friends and I taught the laborers about political problems, social problems and economical problems. Also, we supported their efforts to organize a union was very hard, because if some workers started to organize a union, the factory owner organized an opposing group to prevent them from forming a union. Sometimes,

members of these groups would steal important papers for registering the union, beat up and lock up important members, and the factory owner would fire the leaders. Moreover, the factory owner took every measure to win workers over; for example, they gave some money to workers in order to break them away from a union, and they bought some people who were gangsters to beat up the workers.

Therefore, the fight to build a union was a very big job. Often, workers would occupy the factory and go on an all-night, stay-in strike. One of the support groups to organize a union event appended. That means, one laborer burned himself alive for the purpose of organizing a union. He could not stand the factory owner's brutality any more. Soo Lee, he is gone; but he left a democratic labor union in his factory to his friends. There were many men of fervid loyalty for a democratic country and people's right. I don't know how many people sacrificed for the good of other people by giving up their lives.

In Korea, we have a saying, "A democracy grows up drinking people's blood." I mourn over their deaths, and I don't want their deaths to have been in vain.