

Between Heaven and Earth: Book Two - A Cross to Bear - Chapter Fourteen - Falling Leaves

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By the time the autumn rains arrived, Guy was well along in his schooling. He pressed Jeong Sook a little on some of the details of her story. It was probably the journalist in him.

"So how about your father, why was he arrested?"

"In that paradise of the north there are uncountable reasons why somebody get arrested. My father is a good man, not a criminal. Don't think that. They got a whole bunch of prison and work camps to hold all the peoples they don't shoot. Everyone better be careful who they talk to and what they say. Anybody report you to the police.

"So someone reported your father to the police?"

"Yeah, maybe. You get reported for anything that's not exactly like what they want you to say. You get reported if you forget to say the great things about the Kims and the party. You get reported if you eat food that don't belong to you. You get reported for buying and selling to feed your family. Many ways to get reported."

Guy, of course, had heard such stories but he, like a lot of other people, thought they might be over exaggerations in this day and age.

"How about your dad?" Guy thought it was important and tried to focus her on the topic at hand.

"My father was an official in the government, the part that is about culture and religion."

"Religion, I thought North Korea is communist and atheist, you know, no religion."

"Of course Communist and no religion but they can't erase it 100%. Other countries gonna blame them a lot so they use and control religion. They used my father for this kinda thing."

"So your father is Christian?" Guy was trying to get to the bottom of it.

"Not Christian. You don't know Dong-Hak." She stopped and thought about how to explain such things. "You got to know about Dong-hak and The Way of Heaven." She stopped again and thought.

Then she continued, "Our father was the leader of the Way of Heaven in North Korea. It is an original Korean religion and when the communists took over they had many, many members in Pyongyang. My father's uncle was the leader and when he died my father became the boss. Kim Il-sung liked the Way of Heaven because it was an all Korean religion. He got a lot of his ideas about 'Korea is the center of the world' from them. They believe like that. As long as they go along with Kim Il-sung and the worker's party they were allowed to exist. Our father tried to protect the religion and the believers but it put him in a very difficult place. Finally he couldn't go along with what the government wanted him to do. They insisted he inform on the activities of the members and he refused. He got warned but he make up his mind already and he refused. Our mom begged him but he refused. It was his true mind, his, what can I call it, conscience," she used the Korean word yang-shim that Guy recognized.

"One night they came to our house and got him. He was just gone. We couldn't find him for eight days. We didn't know if he was dead or alive. Finally they let us see him but it wasn't him, really. They torture him and he looked half dead. They told us we'd better get him to change his mind or it would go bad for all of us. Of course, he wouldn't relent. They charged him with treason and sent him to the worst prison camp. It was a death sentence for both him and my mother. She died of a broken heart. I saw him once before they transported him. He urged me to get out. I promised him." Jeong Sook told Guy all this in a deadpan tone but began silently weeping at the end.

All this went to the very core of Jeong Sook's inner agony. As she related the details of her father's dilemma it was like mining the depths of her own. Over time it had been coming slowly into focus. Putting it into words solidified it. She began to understand that she would never be free, really free, while her father rotted away as a prisoner of conscience in a gulag. For the first time the idea of rescuing her father came into her mind. She immediately dismissed it as foolhardy. But it didn't go away easily.

Guy was still trying to understand this woman and getting the facts was his normal method.

"I've never heard of, what did you call it, Dunk-hak or the other one, a way of heaven was it? Are they the same thing?"

"It's Dong-hak. It mean 'Eastern Learning. It started when all the learning from the west flooded into our country. Six thousand years of our learning was in danger of being lost. One guy started to put together many things that had arisen in this land. It go back to the shamanism of the long ago past. It also join the ideas and beliefs that came here from other places and became new Korean style like 'The Way' and the four great books from China as well as the Buddha from Nepal and Indo. Also they used some of the Christian religion. All together it was Korean. First it was an education and believe movement. Then it was very popular with the poor landless farmers and became rebellion against the last dynasty. The dynasty crush it but it reformed as 'Way Of Heaven' and became mostly a religion and social improvement group. This is Korean history but you guys don't know much."

Well, Guy had to agree that he hadn't known much about this but there was Google and Wikipedia. He figured he would find out more.

Jeong Sook brightened up considerably and announced, "I know the top guy at the Way of Heaven headquarters here in Seoul. He remember my Grandfather, uncle, my father. I'm gonna let him know you and you can ask him any question."

"Sure, set it up. I got a lot of questions."

And so he did some due diligence on the net and got some of the basic facts like dates and names. She, of course, was as good as her word and set up the meeting.

On the following Wednesday evening they went together to the headquarters of The Way of Heaven. It was a small compound located in central Seoul near Insadong. It consisted of several buildings surrounding a dirt playground or parking lot. One building was clearly offices or class rooms and next to it the larger building could be mistaken for a Catholic church if there had been a cross on the top. Inside was a sanctuary and some more class rooms. They were met at the front door by a young lady who led them to a large room with a conference table. They were introduced to a smiling Korean man in a threadbare suit, horn rimmed glasses, and dark black hair; too dark for his mid- sixties age. His name was Han Young-mi. The three young women were introduced as, simply, good at English, and would be translating. Once tea was served, Mr. Han began.

"Our people are and have always been a religious people. Many of the world's religions, having originated in other countries, flowered through the devotion of the people on this land. Many have taken on unique forms as practiced here. They are the repository of great wisdom that has become the treasure of our people. There is a strong belief among many that Korea is destined to be the light of the world.

At times of great crisis extraordinary people appear. In the middle years of the 19th century such a man appeared. His name was Choi Je-u and he was a scholar and a gentleman. He was wide awake and saw both the decline of the nation due to corruption among the nobles and the Choson dynasty. At the same time new ideas from the west including religion, politics, and technology were undermining the peoples self identity. His solution was to gather the wisdom of the ages contained in shamanism, folk religions, Taoism, Buddhism and Confucianism and create a school of eastern learning as a bulwark against the eroding influence of western ideas. He was able to inspire both disaffected noblemen and the poor peasants. He called for a return to 'The Way of Heaven' that has been practiced on this peninsula from time immemorial. His movement was considered anti-foreign, anti-noble class, and anti-dynasty. He was arrested and executed by the agents of the dynasty but his movement lived on and eventually inspired a wide based peasant rebellion. In order to put down the revolt, the Choson dynasty enlisted the help of both Japan and China. They both sent armies and the Donghak was crushed. The foreign soldiers never left and competed with each other to dominate the royal family and Korea. Finally the Japanese won out and the long dark night of Japanese colonialism began."

Most of this Guy had already learned. What was new to him was the implied accusation that it was the Choson dynasty that was responsible for the Japanese occupation of Korea.

"So what became of the Donghak after it was defeated?" Guy had a list of questions.

Mr. Han answered in detail. The translators did a yeoman's job and it seemed to Guy they distilled Mr. Han's long winded remarks down to their essence which greatly reduced the time lags. In essence, the remnants of Donghak reformed as a new group called the Way of Heaven. It became a patriotic, social welfare promoter, and a spiritual group. It played a key role in resisting Japan including the May 1st Independence Movement. It is known today as Chondogyo or Religion of the Heavenly Way.

Next Guy asked about The Way of Heaven in North Korea. Again there was a long detailed answer with a condensed English translation.

It seems as if both the fledgling South Korean government and Kim Il-sung tried to get the religion's endorsement. The group's legacy of universal human rights, pride in all things Korean, and anti-Japanese activities made it popular among the people. In particular, Kim liked the anti- dynasty, anti-noble class, and anti-foreign stances because they fit well into his view of a uniquely Korean Marxist-Leninism that became his guiding Juche or self reliance philosophy.

Han then related the following story which fascinated Guy and moved Jeong Sook to tears.

"The 'Second Samil Independence Movement,' was conducted by Chondogyo members in North Korea in 1948. The event had been kept secret for many years to protect the participants still in the north.

The timing was the early part of 1948, after the US-USSR Joint Commission had failed in its efforts to unify Korea through direct negotiations between the two occupying powers. The United Nations General Assembly had taken over the task of unifying Korea and had sent a commission to Korea to supervise elections for a nation-wide government. When the UN Commission was denied access to North Korea, faithful Chondogyo members in the north, who maintained contact with their general headquarters in Seoul, requested permission to stage some sort of demonstration to dramatize their opposition to a permanent division of the nation and for national unification.

After a brief period of hesitation, Chondogyo leaders in Seoul agreed to the planned demonstration and decided to accept the offer of two dedicated women to serve as emissaries of the Chondogyo headquarters in Seoul to carry the go-ahead to the North Korean Chondogyo leaders. Mrs. Pak Hyon-hwa and Mrs. Yu Un-dok set off from Seoul for North Korea on February 7, 1948.

Mrs. Yu, whose husband had carefully written her message in small writing on Korean paper and hidden it in the lining of her undergarments, suffered frostbite in the mountains just above the 38th parallel. She was picked up by the North Korean authorities and reportedly was executed.

Mrs. Pak succeeded in reaching Pyongyang and transmitting the directive to the Chondogyo leaders. The top leadership of Chondogyo in the north resolved, after careful consideration, to follow the directions from Seoul and hold a mass rally on March 1. They made the error, however, of making their decision known to a member who was also a leader of the political party and Chairman of the Supreme People's Committee of the North Korean regime. He claimed to disagree with the other leaders' decision on the grounds that its implementation would exact too high a price in terms of suffering and sacrifice among Chondogyo members. The Chondogyo leaders then changed their tactics and turned the implementation of the plan over to its underground group. This underground apparatus did its work thoroughly and quickly, so that all prospective participants were notified and all preparations made well in advance of March 1.

About four days before the target date, however, the traitor, apparently with a view to saving himself rather than his fellow Chondogyo members, reported the entire plan to the Communist security police. As a result, some 10,000 Chondogyo leaders and members were arrested, but all except 87 persons were later released. Five of the 87 were sentenced to death and the remaining 82 given sentences of hard labor ranging from seven years to "unlimited" sentences.

Despite the disastrous outcome in Pyongyang and other urban centers, the demonstration plans were carried out in a number of remote sections of North Korea.

Mrs. Pak returned to Seoul, where she is still living. We have checked the details of this story with her."

It was past eleven o'clock and in an atmosphere heavy with emotion, the meeting came to an end. Most of Guy's questions were neither asked nor answered. In fact he now had a few more.

As Guy and Jeong Sook walked to the subway station, it began to rain and she continued to cry softly.