

Rising from the Ashes of War: Seoul, 1953-1960

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During Father's ministry in Seoul, beginning in 1953, and the founding of HSA-UWC in 1954, Seoul and all Korea were in turmoil. The Korean War was stalled by a ceasefire on July 23, with the division of the peninsula at the 38th parallel maintained more or less as it was. An unsettling peace followed. The task of rising from the destruction of war had begun. Actually, Korea was picking up the fragmented pieces of the restoration begun after the end of the Second World War and beginning the process of rising again.

Somehow the problems of persecution against Father and our church seem more comprehensible when we know what stresses struck Korea even after the tribulation of war. The survival and growth of our church seem more poignant and meaningful when we consider the unlikely environment from which early members' faith emerged.

An end to isolation

The isolation Koreans had experienced from the world would end, painfully for some, and refreshingly for others. One common critical observation of the interim government which arose under the American influence, was that it was "an interpreter's government." Those Koreans who spoke English were more likely to be placed in certain responsible positions than those who couldn't. An encounter with the Western world of democracy had come as a shock and as a mixed blessing.

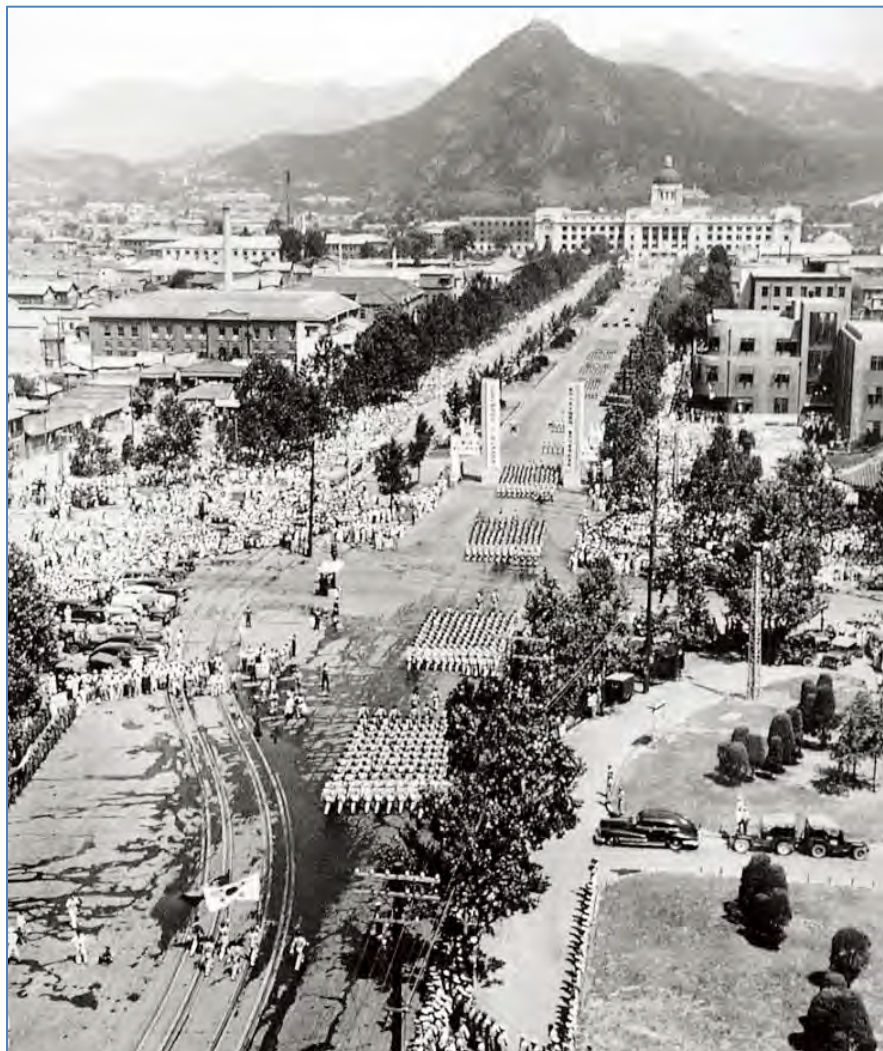
Much confusion surfaced in Seoul at the time of elections in 1948, with over 300 separate groups pressing forward to claim status as political parties of the fledgling Asian democracy which was, at that time, a risky experiment. Syngman Rhee had emerged as the foremost patriot, standing as a centerpole of the action, while around him swirled elements of politics, defense, economics, and massive doses of foreign aid. Old clan loyalties faded as competitive new factional politics took a grip on the nation.

Between 1953 and 1960 a series of strategies directed the rebuilding of the nation, but plans either succeed or fail depending on the persons effecting them. It was a time of testing, and as President Park would later observe, a time of forging the national will of the Korean people.

Priorities

The problem was to determine which problems should take priority. Agriculture? Construction? Industry? Since most sources of energy had been severed from the agricultural South by partitioning, new coal mines and hydroelectric plants were essential. Beyond the problem of primitive transportation routes, the

war effort had destroyed most existing bridges, tunnels, and irrigation systems which had been in use. Housing for hundreds of thousands had been ruined, and Seoul itself, after four invasions by the enemy and four recoveries by bombs and tanks, lay in piles of broken tiles and rubble along meandering footpaths. Wooden shacks and shantytowns sprang up with every returning family.



Seoul in 1946

Rebuilding Seoul

The new Seoul would have grid streets, broad avenues, plazas and zoning, laid out according to the specifications of T-squares and contingency plans and foreign engineers, and Korean dreams. At every step, care was taken to preserve ancient Seoul, her palaces, gates, sacred groves and burial grounds, and garden parks where great kings had walked. Koreans found themselves divided in a new way. Torn between the proud old culture and tradition which had produced them; and new Westernized modern ways that often seemed to negate all values they cherished. The long-held tradition that no building in Seoul should stand taller than the King's own palace, was sadly pushed aside, as high-rise buildings climbed story by story above the skyline of Seoul.

As the plotters and planners surveyed the towns, one fact emerged above all other considerations: the people themselves were the number one resource. The exodus from villages to cities awakened new awareness of the serious lack of health care, literacy, clean water, and skills. Education would have to come high on the list of priorities. The new emphasis on production, management, and a self-sufficient modern economy made education a vital requirement. Achievement would come in the 1960s only if education was stressed in the 1950s. New schools opened in Seoul, Busan and every town between.

But defense absolutely had to come first. The drafting of all young men continued with strong enforcement, to build a deterrent against invasion. Defense became the first priority in the lives of the people who felt so intimately the prevailing threat from the North. And defense would prove to be an excellent investment.

Soldiers took responsibility for reforestation, and civil construction projects, and soon new dams would stand obediently harnessing rivers for electric power and water for irrigation. Modern roads were carved through hills, replacing oxcart trails. New fertilizer plants opened to replace those lost to the North. Lime and chemicals were packaged and distributed, providing vital nutrients to enrich exhausted soils, leached by the floodwaters which allowed rice to grow.

Strategies

The strategies first called for replacing expensive imported consumer goods with domestic substitutes, then replacing imported raw materials with those which could be mined or produced in South Korea.

Next came the strategy of export: Seoul could tip the balance of foreign trade to her favor by keeping labor cost down and winning customers for her wares: textiles, shoes and rubber boots, and knits. The list of items kept growing in keeping with the expansion of ports, industry, commerce -- and the population.

Amassing capital was absolutely necessary in order to make public utilities, education, and military, possible. For the nation to operate on a moneyed economy was a new experience for Korea; under neo-Confucianism, barter and trade had been the standard, all the way to its conclusion in 1905. Capitalism now became another new alien technology to master.

Tax incentives aimed at newly-established exporters meant more Korean businessmen mingling with foreigners, with Koreans emerging from the reputation of being from "the Hermit Kingdom," to being renowned world-level traders. A traditional Korean distaste for foreign language was subtly replaced by a new appreciation of development, which spoke the language of dollars.

Gaining recognition from the world community, of its legitimacy as an independent nation worthy to stand among its giant and formidable neighbors, was one more necessity for South Korea. Membership in the United Nations was repeatedly denied. But recognition had to be won in other ways, and quickly.

The government of Korea demanded that Japan recognize Korea's claim over exclusive fishing rights in territorial waters of the Sea of Japan. It was an important step. Also, Koreans demanded financial assistance in the form of loans from Japanese banks. The issue was significant: Develop Korea for the sake of Koreans, not for the sake of Japan, as had happened during the years of Japanese annexation. The responsibility for Korea's pitiful state of underdevelopment must be held in part by Japan.

Economic development alone could never satisfy the restless spiritual energies of South Koreans as they yearned for unity for their divided nation. They had not been responsible for the partition of their peninsula but now they felt the necessity to bring resolution. Perhaps Koreans, even without knowing the Principle, were working on the restoration of their colonial period.



Korean refugee family carrying all their belongings on their backs, returning home after the Korean War.

Growing pains and restless spirits

Into Seoul had poured the youth, the homeless, the ambitious, the dissatisfied, the fortunate and the rebellious, from all over Korea. Despite the miraculous development and change that had been occurring, serious deficits still existed, and the emphasis upon consumer goods and secondary industries meant that the goal of energy production and primary industry (such as steel production) were still lacking.

Heavy reliance on economic aid meant that still the economy was on a shaky foundation. Raging

inflation, newly-sprouted democracy, and old factional rivalries, combined to make a combustible mixture ready to be ignited. Repeatedly the ruling political party clamped down, with arrests on rival politicians. There was serious lack of trust among the people, as accusations of blame were hurled, and hope for the future was sought. Students demonstrated, and in the Armed Forces rumors circulated of communist-inspired insurrections, being held or planned.

Around the aging President, who was no longer in touch with the hearts of his people, a dangerous gulf swirled; amid the opportunists there grew a leadership vacuum which had to be filled by men of vision... or by others.

Centralized authority, a single-mindedness of national purpose, new efforts to bring relief to the impoverished countryside, and a strong new voice for reunification with their northern brother – these would be the stepping stones toward a new spirit of unity for Korea.

Reconstruction was a painful process. There must have been much historical aching in the hearts of the people for a strong central leader like those great kings of the past who had made Seoul the glorious capital and center of culture and national life.

They say the annual "spring hunger" of the farmers was especially bad during those years. The time had come when old reserves of food and supplies had been used up, and the new time of planting was at hand.

By the spring of 1960, Seoul was at a breaking point. Any quick word in the capital would trigger the nation to alarm. On the campuses, the students organized in angry protest, and across the nation the labor unions went on strike. Truly it was democracy in action, and the American presence observed, uneasily, but with minimum involvement. Koreans themselves would have to be the authors of the fate of the nation's politics.

At this time, a curious effect came to pass, from an incident which had happened just two years before the Korean War began. In 1948 one military man had been arrested for conspiracy crimes, which could have led to his execution, but American observers advised President Rhee that communist insurrection was not at work in this case; rather it was intra-army politics. Also, there was an outcry among the man's fellow officers, asking Rhee to pardon him. President Rhee pardoned the officer, Park Chung-hee.

Within this man a strong call of history had begun: his countrymen needed him. The time had come to rise above the frightening stagnation which Korea felt in the midst of change. Among the younger officers, Park had built his foundation of trust as a reformer and patriot.

The neglected rural countryside was ready for a change. Seoul was ready for a change. And Park Chung-hee had quietly been preparing to bring a change.

New priorities were emerging for Korea, and new leaders faced the challenge to place their names in the history books. This time of trial had welded the nation's will into a mandate for continuing victory.

Korea had risen again like a phoenix, out of the ashes of tragedy of the Korean War. Our church too, struggled to survive and grow. Patterns of struggles of our church coincide with this history of the external nation. Korea, and the Unification Church within, embraced their fate, newly welded against the fate of the world for the blossoming of God's new dispensation.

The year 1960, when True Parents were blessed in marriage, had arrived.