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Seoul, Korea, 1950

Working as an Actress for the North Korean Communists

Ch'oe Ūnhŭi* (born 1930), a passage from whose autobiography is published next, was a major star of the South Korean screen.¹² In 1978, she and her husband, Shin Sang-ok, a film director from South Korea, were, by command of Kim Jong Il (born 1941, the son of Kim Il Sung, the first leader of Communist North Korea, and now the "Supreme Leader" of North Korea after his father's death in 1994), abducted from Hong Kong on separate occasions and transferred to North Korea.¹³ This violent act was motivated by Kim Jong Il's bid to improve the film industry in North Korea. Convinced, as head of Propaganda and Agitation when he was in the Korean Worker's Party's Central Committee in the 1960s and 1970s, that film was the key to revolutionary transformation of North Korean arts and culture, Kim Jong Il supervised a number of film adaptations from the early 1970s onwards, including works written by his father during World War II. As Kim Jong Il put it in *On the Art of Cinema* (1973), "The task set before the cinema today is one of contributing to people's development into true Communists. This historic task requires, above all, a revolutionary transformation of the practice of directing."¹⁴

When Ch'oe* and her husband arrived in North Korea, they were subjected to a five-year period of "reeducation"; upon its completion, they started producing movies. Among the movies made at the dictator-to-be's insistence was *Pulgasari*, a North Korean version of *Godzilla*.¹⁵ In 1986, while in Austria, they "defected" to the West. Since their escape, the couple has been a source of what is considered the "most extensive and reliable firsthand information on Kim."¹⁶

But the passage reprinted herein deals with a significantly earlier period of Ch'oe Ūnhŭi's life and artistic enlistment by North Korean Communists: her experiences during the Korean War (1950–1953). In particular, she recalls how it was that, during the three-month occupation of Seoul by the North Koreans (late June to late September 1950), she was conscripted to work for

From Ch'oe, Ūn-hŭi, *Ch'oe Ūn-hŭi ūi kobaek: Yŏnghwa poda tŏ yŏnghwa ka'ŭn sam* (Ch'oe Ūn-hŭi's *Confessions: A Life More Movie-like than a Movie*). (Seoul: Random House Korea, 2007), 69–77. Published with permission of Random House Korea. Translated and partially annotated by Clark W. Sorensen.

* Ch'oe is her last name.

the "Security Police Auxiliary Troupe." The passage attests to the importance that North Korean Communists ascribed to culture, even during wartime. But one of the most interesting aspects of the text reproduced herein concerns how Ch'oe Ūnhŭi decided, when the North Korean forces were retreating as the Allied Armies approached Seoul, whether to "run away now" or "escape later." Such a momentous decision came down to "drawing lots." Essentially because of indecision, she, like many people, stayed in Seoul during the North Korean occupation. She would "escape later," and was forced to retreat North with the Security Police Auxiliary Troupe.

CHAPTER 4: AN ACTRESS'S SAD WAR

War Breaks Out

In 1950 we were on location in Mokp'o* shooting *A Man's Path*. At dawn on 25 June the North Korean People's Army crossed the 38th parallel, and descended on Ūijŏngbu. We heard news that they would be pressing toward Seoul. My senior colleague Namgung Ryŏn was beside herself with joy saying, "Now a good world will come. A world like heaven is going to come."

"Huh? What kind of world is that?" I repeated, completely bewildered.

"I'm talking about a world in which the poor people will eat and live well."

Namgung Ryŏn later ended up crossing to the North. The production set began to get agitated, and the staff rushed around helter-skelter. The production team gathered up all the equipment, and the actors, too, hurried to pack their things.

"Since everybody is going to flee, let's us go to Pusan, too."

They urged everybody to go to Pusan, but I, as I often did, chose an inflexible path.

"I'm also worried about my family members, so I'm going to Seoul!"

Kim Haksŏng [her husband at the time] had been infirm and was suffering from tuberculosis, so if I went to shoot a picture my sister-in-law used to take care of him. But when I arrived in Seoul my sister-in-law Kim Yŏnsil had crossed north following Kang Haeil, the newspaper reporter she had been seeing, and was not there. They told me she had taken her younger daughter and Kim Haksŏng's son with her. They said she had left her older daughter with neighbors, and nobody knew where she had gone. Calling it a state of anarchy,[†] nobody was in their proper mind.

* A port on the southwest coast of Korea.

† Ch'oe Ūnhŭi was nineteen years old during this period, so the influence of her family was very strong at that time.

‡ The original text uses *nallit'ong* here, which might mean "expertise on rebellions," but it seems likely that the intended word is the more commonly used *nallip'an*, meaning "in a state of rebellion, or all in an uproar."

At sunrise the next day the People's Army entered Seoul with overwhelming force. In Seoul all Hell broke loose*. We could hear the sound of gunfire nearby, and the sound of tanks made a clamor. A little later an ashen soldier ran pell-mell into our house.

"Lady, please give me something to eat."

The soldier's manner was that of a young-looking kid.

"What on earth has happened?"

I was confused, and when I questioned him the soldier answered, breathing heavily.

"In the wake of the People's Army invasion we've done nothing but retreat overnight for three days. I've been pushed down here without let up, and I haven't slept at all."

I quickly served him some rice and wrapped up an egg for him. The soldier thanked me and quickly ran out the door. I hoped sincerely that the young man would just leave in health and without incident.

When those who had been imprisoned for leftist thought were freed due to entry of the People's Army into the city, they strictly played their role as agents of the Communist Party during the time that Seoul was occupied. They ferreted out families of policemen, families of soldiers, people who resisted by refusing to join leftist organizations, and reported them to the People's Security Bureau†. Among my cousins I had a younger one who was dragged into the mountains and shot for the reason that he was a policeman. The culture and art world was no exception to this. In order to live some of them even informed on the location of colleagues' houses. Young students for the most part were drawn into the People's Army.

I suggested that we flee together to Kwangju in Kyōnggi Province, the home town of my parents' relatives. Though I kept pestering my husband that we should flee following my relatives, as a consequence of his resisting and always saying he didn't want to go, I had no choice but to remain in Seoul.

On 28 June 1950, Seoul after three days fell to the People's Army. Over the short time of three days frightful incidents swept past our life like a typhoon. People who would leave had mostly left, and the rest didn't go out and were hidden in their houses. The streets were exposed to danger, but the National Army had already retreated beforehand so fighting did not directly reach the streets. We merely heard the rumor that the bridge on the Han River‡ had been blown up, but we didn't know what society was going to return to. On the radio they kept broadcasting that we should remain calm and not panic.

*The expression in the text *Sōul i abikyut'an ūi hyōnjang iyōtta* reads literally "Seoul was a scene of Avici and Raurava". Avici and Raurava are the Sanskrit names of two of the eight Buddhist hells.

†Inmin Powibu.

‡Seoul was originally built in a valley several miles north of the Han River, and in those days the built up areas were all north of the Han River. At Seoul the river is still a bit tidal and has deep swift sections that can be crossed only by boat or bridge, and in those days there was only one railway bridge and one car bridge across the river. The Han River, thus, became a significant barrier difficult to cross as a result of the destruction of the bridge.

We Entrust our Fate to Drawing Lots

We didn't have anything to eat at home. I emerged from the house determined to sell a watch in order to buy some rice or something. I came down a hilly lane in Namsan Precinct to city streets that were empty, though occasionally a People's Army soldier shouldering a machine gun was visible.

"Comrade! Comrade!"

I heard a voice calling me from behind, and then somebody firmly grasped my shoulder. I turned around startled out of my wits, and a man in the bluish uniform of a People's Army officer was standing smiling at me.

"Comrade. Aren't you Comrade Chōe Ūnhūi?"

"Yes... that's... right, but..."

"I'm Sim Yōng!"

As a famous actor who worked with Master Hwang Chōl during the Japanese Colonial Period, I had heard the story that Sim Yōng had crossed north after liberation. We had never worked in the theater together and we hadn't ever even met, but he said people in the north are broadly familiar with the performers of the south. At that time I had been rising as the bright hope of the Arang Theater, and having shot three pictures it seemed that my name had become known even in the north.

"Comrade. What are you doing right now?"

"Well... I'm just at home right now."

My heart went cold.

"Where are you going right now?"

"I'm on my way to the market to buy some rice."

He had been staring at me with sharp eyes for a while, and then he said, "Comrade, follow me," and started walking in front of me. I followed him up to a two-story house on a street corner, and he said that the place was the office of the Auxiliary Squad to the Security Police belonging to the North Korean Interior Ministry. While telling me that Mr. Sim Yōng was gathering together artists, they encouraged me to join. They told me that already many artists were being lodged together at Myōngdong Cathedral*.

"My husband is sick in bed, and I also have young children, so I can't work. If I go over there, there won't be anybody to look after the needs of the family."

"I also know Colleagues Kim Yōnsil and Kim Haksōng pretty well. We'll give you rations, so don't worry and go on home."

By that method I received rations of rice and cigarettes, so I went home to tell my family what had transpired, and left right away to join the Security Police Auxiliary Troupe. The Security Police Auxiliary Troupe was using the part of Myōngdong Cathedral where the nuns had lived and eaten. There were the actors Kim Tongwōn, Kim Sūngho, Chu Chūngnyō, Ha Okchu, the conductor Im Wōnsik, the baritone O Hyōnmyōng, etc. about two hundred artists. North

*Myōngdong Cathedral, a tall brick gothic edifice built by the French fathers, had been one of the tallest buildings in central Seoul since the 1890s.

Korea as a matter of policy had been pulling together artists of all genres without discrimination—theater, cinema, music, art, dance. Concentrated together like prisoners, during the day we rehearsed plays and did pacification activities* and so forth while at night we watched North Korean movies and received thought education. They said religion is opium, and even piled Bibles as high as a mountain in the courtyard and burnt them.

It was on an unusually bright moonlit night on my way back to the dormitory from watching a movie in the main sanctuary of the cathedral. Just then something somehow glinting in the moonlight caught my eye. I looked, worried that somebody might see me, and picking up the glinting object it turned out to be a crucifix. I wasn't a Christian at that time, but I quickly concealed in my breast the crucifix that had been walked on, and for a long time carried it around with me.

In the Security Police Auxiliary Troupe once a week, or every 10 days or so, they would give us our rations, and send us home on leave, but if one of us didn't come back by the permitted time they demanded that person do self criticism and ask forgiveness.

From 28 June until it was retaken three months later Seoul was governed by the Chosŏn People's Army. One day in the distance we could hear the sound of bombing, and through the 15 September Inchŏn landing campaign the allied army advanced, and it was said that Seoul was surrounded on three sides. The People's Army decided to retreat, and they sent the Security Police Auxiliary Troupe on a final leave. They threatened us that if we didn't come back at the appointed time, they would consider us reactionary elements, and even our families could not be secure. I went home carrying rice and cigarettes.

"If we don't run away now, we'll get dragged along with them. What should we do?"

"I'm not sure. What do you want to do?"

Kim Hak-sŏng asked me while smoking a cigarette.

"Can we go somewhere and hide out? Let's go to my home village."

"Perhaps, but how could we get there?"

"I suppose it's hard for you to move, but why don't you ride in a pushcart? I'll pull you along."

Time was pressing and we had to make a decision, but he just dillydallied. At my wit's end, I made up my mind to decide by drawing lots. On one piece of paper I wrote, "Run away now." On another piece of paper I wrote, "Escape later."

"OK. Pick one."

Carefully he selected one of the pieces of paper. It was, "Escape later." I had to go out of the house leaving word that I would return later. It was a tense moment alternating life and death for all I knew, but with no room for any other thought I ran panting back to the Security Police Auxiliary Troupe to meet the appointed hour.

*The Korean term *sŏnmu kongjak* (pacification activities) refers to propaganda activities designed to win over the populace, and implies spreading calming messages.

Northward, Northward

Left wing artists substituted for the People's Army in keeping watch on our fellow members. Because of talent, artists survived, and because of talent, artists met up with danger. It was a time when no matter how close your friendship you could not speak your inner mind. Park Min, who had risen from supporting actor origin in a theater troupe, now went around wearing a gun. He always emphasized ceremony, and used to criticize me fiercely saying, "Comrade, you've eaten wrong ideology. Do self criticism." If one suddenly was called a "reactionary," everything ended.

I had done performances of several works together with my senior colleague Kim Tongwŏn at Theater Guild, and we had even been co-stars in the film *Night Sun*, and so he was the only person to whom I could speak in confidence. He was a powerful performer, too, and yet he was an actor with a meticulous nature and his family life, too, was a model, so he was respected by everybody. Now that I had been dragged off together with senior colleague Kim Tongwŏn, we made plans together to escape taking the proper moment at the right time.

Our column being dragged north got divided into two. They told us that of the two hundred members of our unit one hundred would leave via Kaesŏng, and one hundred would leave via Ch'unchŏn. However there was the little trifle that senior colleague Kim Tongwŏn was paired off with Ms. Chu Chŭngnyŏ and left for Kaesŏng, while I was paired with Mr. Kim Sŭngho and made to leave for Ch'unchŏn. It was pitch dark in front of us. The only person I trusted was Kim Tongwŏn, and if even he were absent, how could I dare to escape?

The retreat of the People's Army began. It was in the middle of the night, and even I formed a line and left for the north wearing a People's Army uniform. The naval bombardment in Inchŏn lit up the sky. It was said that the National Army was going to return, and yet they were telling me I had to leave my beloved hometown behind, and go off on a road without a pledge of when I could return. . . .

We all threw our rucksacks over our shoulders, and left forming a column along the side of the road. It was a scene different from a column of refugees. The musicians with their instruments fastened to their shoulders took up the rear. During the day, in order to avoid air raids we put up in people's houses putting on performances, and we only moved at night. Park Min and Ha Okchu of the Theater Alliance watched over us as foxes in tiger skins* so that we could only get it by observing their intentions. Doing a forced march following the People's Army was difficult even for the men.

"If you want to escape you can't tire now. Strengthening your legs has to come before anything else."

I walked until I didn't have any more strength. On either side I could hear the sound of labored, heavy breathing. My feet were a mass of blisters, and my toenails had begun to fall out. The few people who absolutely couldn't move any more got

*Foxes in tiger skins (*hogahowi*) is a metaphor for little people who borrow the authority of the powerful to throw their weight around.

picked up by People's Army trucks, but I grasped my walking stick, gritted my teeth, and walked stubbornly on.

An Opportunity for Escape

I heard the news that because of the success of the Inchŏn landing the [South] Korean government had returned and achieved the 28 September "recovery." I felt a sense of crisis that if I were carried off like this it would be the end. It would be hard to carry off an escape by myself, and so seeking a partner with whom I could discuss which day and how long, I furtively went up to Kim Süngho who was doing her make-up.

"What should we do? Do we just have to go north like this?"

When I whispered to her in a low voice, Kim Süngho stopped powdering her face and looked at me with a strange expression whose contents I couldn't understand.

"Hü-üing..."

She snorted and once again began getting absorbed in applying her makeup. I couldn't send another word her way. I was stung thinking that I had clearly made a mistake.

Ms. Kim Süngho was exceedingly clever as a natural born actor. When they did thought education she would be the first one to yell, "That's right!" and acted like an earnest element*, so she was able to be cooking squad leader. Because the cooking squad leader loaded rice and foodstuffs on a truck and had to go ahead to prepare meals in advance, she usually rode in the truck.

And so one day we had been sleeping, distributed three or four each in farm houses, and the People's Army banged on the doors, rushed in and indiscriminately shook awake male and female alike. We all gathered in the middle of the courtyard.

"Kim Süngho, that reactionary little bitch, has run away. I expect we'll drag that bitch back dead, so you comrades had better understand. Beware and be firm!"

Our hearts skipped a beat. To think she had run away alone without saying a word to anyone... A vision of her in the make-up room floated up. She had been completely unfriendly. Just like me, too, she had plans from the very beginning to run away, and yet with lips as heavy as a lump of rock she hadn't betrayed the slightest emotion!

Later I heard that Ms. Kim Süngho had been riding in the truck, and on a mountain road she had acted as if her stomach hurt so much she could die. The People's Army officer, completely taken in by the performance of the famous actress, went to get a doctor, and in the meantime Kim Süngho calmly succeeded in escaping. While the surveillance of actors was becoming stricter due to the escape of Ms. Kim Süngho, Seoul was just getting farther and farther away. In

* "Earnest element" (*yölsöng punja*) was a term applied to somebody enthusiastic about party activities.

Ch'unchön the baritone Mr. O Hyönmyöng escaped, and the threats and intimidation of the People's Army got worse. As this went on more and more, I constantly looked toward the rear. The actors led the way, and behind them were the musicians and dancers. At the very end were the band, and I knew that I was glimpsing an opportunity for escape.

"Could you fit me in? I'm asking as a favor."

They accepted me without objection. The band were six persons in total, and among them was even the jazz performer Öm T'ömi (uncle of the actor Öm Haengnan). They called each other by code names like First Gun, Second Gun, and Third Gun. Among the band members was a guy named Mr. Pak whose home town they said was Söngchön*. Their plan was that if they should get separated when escaping they would gather together at Söngchön and proceed to Seoul together. I became Seventh Gun.

8-4



East Germany, Late 1940s, Early 1950s

A Young Jazz Fan Trades on the Black Market to Dress in a "Decadent" Way

Jazz—and other kinds of music the Nazis had banned after they took power in 1933—enjoyed significant popularity, especially among young people, in the early post-war period in both East and West Germany.¹⁷ In Leipzig, a major East German city located about an hour by train south of Berlin, one such young jazz aficionado was Reginald Rudolf (1929–2008). Rudolf, in fact, was one of the founders of the early post-war jazz scene in Leipzig, and would go on to become the "most outspoken promoter of jazz music in the GDR [German Democratic Republic, or East Germany]."¹⁸

From Reginald Rudolf, *Nie wieder links: Eine deutsche Reportage (Never Left Again: A German Narrative)*. (Frankfurt-am-Main: Ullstein, 1990), 55–57. Published in English translation with the permission of Ullstein Publishers. Translation: Glennys Young.

* In the mountains northeast of P'yöngyang.