

Another Side of North Korea
by Ellen Clark Greene

Given the negative impression Americans have of North Korea - from the garrison state of goose-stepping soldiers to the hermit kingdom of isolation to the last link with Stalinist communism - North Korea seems like the last place on earth an American would want to visit.

In April, 2007, I traveled to North Korea for one week with Global Exchange as part of their first citizen diplomacy delegation. Such delegations can provide important opportunities for small steps towards mutual understanding and peace. My prior travel with U.S. citizen delegations to Cuba, Vietnam, Afghanistan, Iran, Syria, Lebanon, and Palestinian refugee camps gave me the opportunity to make friends in the most unlikely situations. So somehow I trusted that I would make friends in North Korea too.

With the significant mistrust and hostility between the U.S. and North Korea, some people wonder how such a delegation could occur. Global Exchange worked for a few years with representatives of the Korean Committee for Solidarity with the World People to establish ties, build a relationship, and develop and design the program. The priorities of both groups were to encourage peace and normalization of relations between our two countries. And North Koreans hoped that the road to peace would include reunification with South Korea and that Americans would support that goal. Needless to say, the mutual commitment to a first Global Exchange delegation in April 2007 was an extraordinary achievement.

Some Americans do not think such a delegation should take place given the animosity between the American and North Korean governments. Having learned about the horrors of the Korean War, I do not believe we should wait for another war to advocate for peace. Vietnamese Buddhist monk, Thich Nhat Hahn, knows firsthand about war and peace. He believes that we need to “be peace” in order to create peace in the world. Hahn believes peace can start with a smile. Ironically in my travel to the “Axis of Evil” and to other current or former enemies of the American Government, I’ve experienced many random acts of kindness and hospitality. Cuban expressions of sympathy to our delegation three weeks after the September 11th terrorist attacks and invitations for tea from Palestinian refugees in Syria are just two of many examples. These acts and the people who committed them embody being peace.

Some Americans wonder about the safety of this trip and how we were treated by North Koreans. At no point during our journey did I feel unsafe or unwelcome. Quite the opposite was true. Our trip began with a fervent welcome from the pilot and crew to our delegation on our flight to Pyongyang. In the midst of fervent applause from the passengers, a few flight attendants and passengers approached our group and asked us where we were from and what we would be performing. Through a comedy of errors, they mistakenly thought we were international stars who would be performing at special events to celebrate the 95th birthday of Kim Il Sung. I momentarily thought of saying that we would perform magic tricks for peace. While enjoying the attention and hospitality, I remembered a fervent welcome to Iran four years ago. Our Iranian “government minder” who had studied in the U.S. and was a huge fan of Johnny Cash, gave our Global Exchange delegation an enthusiastic and heartfelt welcome as he recalled with nostalgia the good relations that used to exist between Iran and the U.S.

Several people have asked me to report on human rights and the food shortage in North Korea. With the focus of our trip on the Korean War and North Korean culture, I did not learn much about either issue. However, the food shortage that exists must be compounded by the fuel shortage which was quite evident with barely any vehicles on streets and highways. My hope is that with normalization of relations between North Korea and the United States and reunification of North Korea and South Korea, the military budgets of the two Koreas and the U.S. could be drastically reduced and redirected to improving the lives of people.

As I update this essay in July 2007, the International Atomic Energy Agency has just confirmed that North Korea has shut down its only functioning nuclear reactor. In return North Korea is receiving fuel and food aid. Because of this progress, the U.S. reportedly is willing to start the process of removing North Korea from a list of state sponsors of terrorism. Negotiations for a peace treaty for the Korean War which ended in a cease-fire in 1953 could start next year. A Northeast Asia regional security forum is also contemplated. Though the nuclear reactor closure is only the first of several necessary steps and we have been at this point before, these developments are really quite extraordinary given the long-standing hostilities as well as heightened hostilities during most of President Bush's tenure and the pessimism regarding prospects for peace after North Korea's nuclear weapons tests just last year.

In preparing for the trip to North Korea, I gathered information from various sources including print and electronic media, films and books. In my search I found a lot of information that demonized North Korea and not much which could be helpful in learning anything positive about the people and the culture. So I would like to share a side of North Korea that few Americans hear about.

Americans hear that North Korea is a garrison state but have no understanding of why. North Korea is surrounded by nuclear China and Russia to the west and north and U.S. allies South Korea and Japan to the south and east. The memory of forty years of Japanese occupation and colonization from 1905 through 1945 are still fresh. The wounds from the division of Korea after World War II by the U.S. and the Soviet Union and the staggering human and economic toll of the Korean War are also still fresh. These memories are constantly revived in every aspect of North Korean life in order to make sure the horrors of the past do not occur again.

Touring the capital, Pyongyang, you see no buildings which date from before 1950 and yet the country claims 5000 years of history. Pyongyang was leveled during the Korean War and barely any buildings were left standing. North Korea lost twenty five percent of its population in the war which meant that everyone lost countless family members and friends. Up to seventy five percent of the population either suffered injury or death with no one untouched by the trauma of the war. U.S. troops and weapons based in South Korea since the Korean War continue to be perceived as hostile to North Korea. Since the U.S. used nuclear weapons against Japan in World War II, North Koreans have lived with the threat of a nuclear attack. A colonel we talked with at the DMZ said the North Korean military believes the U.S. still has nuclear weapons pointing at them from South Korea. North Koreans we spoke with said they would like a nuclear-free Korean peninsula, normalization of relations with the U.S. and reunification with South Korea.

Perhaps I can identify with Koreans because I have ancestors from a divided country: Protestant ancestors from Northern Ireland and Catholic ancestors from the Republic of Ireland. As fate would have it, on my trip to North Korea I was assigned a roommate who was also Irish American. Perhaps our combined history helped us make links between the experience of Korea and Ireland. The two divided countries both experienced occupations and control from external powers. And both North Korea and Ireland have experienced devastating famines.

In establishing points of connection, empathy can surface and stereotypes fade. A goose-stepping soldier becomes a person with a family and a history, rather than a robot. As we toured the demilitarized zone dividing North Korea from the South, I asked a young colonel how long he had been in the army. He looked about twenty-five but was actually thirty-six and had been in the military for seventeen years. His father was orphaned at age six during the Korean War. When the orphan grew up, he encouraged his six children, all boys, to become soldiers to defend the country and all of them now serve in the military. Throughout the trip, I got the distinct impression that military service in North Korea is highly respected and revered, much like in Israel. As both North Korea and Israel are surrounded by nations that have been hostile at one time or another, it is easy to see how both countries perceive their survival as critically dependent on the military. One difference of course is that most Americans easily understand the existential threat to Israel but not to North Korea.

The longstanding threat North Koreans have felt from the U.S. reached a new high in January 2002 when President Bush included North Korea in an Axis of Evil along with Iraq and Iran during his State of the Union Address. In March, 2003 as the US went to war against Iraq, it would not be hard to understand why North Koreans might think they would be next on President Bush's list.

With the constant fear about another war and reminders of the Korean war as well as economic problems and food shortages, one could get the impression that there is no joy in North Korea. Moreover with our delegations's partial focus on war and occupation and visits to war museums and monuments and the DMZ, one might think our itinerary was very grim. But that was not our experience. We had many light and humorous moments sharing stories and questions about life, family, and culture with our guides and driver. Our tour also included visits to various places to get a sense of North Korean life: a collective farm, a primary and secondary school, a technical university, a maternity hospital, shops and the subway.

At a school, we visited an English language class and talked with some of the students. When I spoke with a sixteen year old girl about her family and school, she asked me if it was the custom in my country for a younger person to ask an older person about their age. I asked her if she wanted to know my age and she nodded and smiled. She was thrilled to be speaking with a native English speaker and mentioned this was her first opportunity. Meanwhile the teacher was excited to get grammar tips from a school principal in our group.

On a trip to the mountains, our group hiked up to see a series of waterfalls. We encountered many children coming down as we were going up. Each one stopped and bowed and some of us bowed and waved back. With each wave of children, the bowing continued and we reciprocated, not knowing that elders do not typically bow to children. No wonder some of the children looked

amused and perplexed and some bowed again in response to our bows. When one woman in our group was moving slowly on the way down, one child offered his walking stick. Further down another child offered a better stick with a handle which our friend appreciated very much. As our bus departed many of the children waved goodbye and I bowed and waved back.

Cultural performances provided more opportunities to see children bowing. At a school we interrupted a rehearsal of a group of students and were treated to several songs by budding young performers in traditional costumes. We also attended a lively and beautifully choreographed performance at a children's school that specializes in music and theater.

The cultural highlight of our trip was the Arirang Mass Gymnastics and Artistic Performance. Set in a huge open air stadium in Pyongyang, perhaps 100,000 children and adults performed a combination of gymnastics, acrobatics, dance and elaborate formations. Across one side of the stadium, 10,000 children flipped color coded cards to create an ever changing backdrop of beautiful pictures and text which narrated the show. Formations of exquisite costumes and mesmerizing movement on the floor complemented the mosaics of the cards above. Themes of the sorrows and struggles of the past, liberation from colonialism and war, rebuilding of the country and hope for a prosperous future predominated the show. Arirang is the name of a beloved Korean folk song. A version sung in the early 20th century was used to express sorrow during Japanese colonialism. Remembering that version now acknowledges the struggle for freedom from occupation and war and honors unity and hard work in rebuilding the country.

One feature of the culture that seems to come without a lot of struggle or hard work is beauty. You see no advertising for products in North Korea, so obviously there are no billboards or ads portraying the ideal beautiful woman or handsome man, nor oodles of products to help live up to an unattainable standard. Our South Korean guide who has lived in the U.S. for many years remembered an old saying that North Korean women were more beautiful than in the South and South Korean men were more handsome than in the North. As I found our bus driver strikingly handsome, I told our guide that this thinking must be incorrect and I jokingly announced that I had a new boyfriend. All of our guides laughed along with the bus driver. Hung Guk became boyfriend number one. The improbability of an American woman having a North Korean boyfriend evolved into much more than an opportunity for humor. Ironically, joking about an impossible relationship opened up further possibilities of caring and connection.

At a cultural dance celebration of what seemed like 10,000 people in Kim Il Sung square, I met boyfriend number two. After the choreographed performance, foreigners were invited into the square to dance with the performers. The man who would be boyfriend number two eagerly invited me to dance and coached me along with the steps and arm movements. As I danced on the square flanked by photos of Kim Il Sung on one end and Marx and Lenin on the other and a sea of pastel dresses and black suits in the middle, I wondered how I would adequately describe the euphoria of this unlikely experience to anyone at home. Later, during the bus ride back to our hotel, when I announced I was missing boyfriend number two, a chorus of laughter erupted among our guides.

The day after meeting boyfriend number two, I adopted one of our North Korean guides as boyfriend number three. Ten years my senior, he protested and offered the relationship of Elder Brother instead. The laughter about my North Korean boyfriends continued as I adopted a fourth

boyfriend - a colonel in the army. Boyfriend number four and I posed together for a picture in the DMZ - shaking hands - with me holding fingers up forming a peace sign.

Still boyfriend number one remained number one. At dinner one evening he asked me how many children I had. He was surprised and sad to hear I had no children and was not married. He thought I must be very lonely living all by myself. We also talked about his mother and his mother-in-law and how his family took care of them in their last years. Then he quietly sang me a song in Korean dedicated to a mother. As he sang in one ear and our South Korean guide translated in my other ear, I started to tear up.

The reverence and respect for elders living and deceased has a long history in Korean culture and is partly rooted in Chinese Confucianism. This helps explain in part the devotion to Kim Il Sung who is referred to as the Great Leader. As our visit to North Korea was timed to coincide with celebrations for the 95th birthday of the deceased Kim Il Sung, we were able to see many examples of devotion to him. Devotion to Kim Il Sung mainly stems from his long guerrilla resistance against Japanese occupation and his leadership of this country since its founding. Prior to the collapse of the Soviet Union, Kim Il Sung helped develop the country into what North Koreans perceived to be a shining Socialist success. After Kim Il Sung's death in 1994, his son, Kim Jong Il, who is called the Dear Leader, was named his official successor after a three year period of mourning. Despite famine and economic hardship during the mid to late 1990's and continuing shortages of food and energy, the devotion to the both Leaders continue.

Images of father and son are pervasive in North Korean society - countless statues, monuments, pictures, and billboards adorn streets, squares and parks. Schools, hospitals, restaurants and other public places display pictures of the both father and son. Most North Koreans I saw wore a small Kim Il Sung pin above and to the left of their hearts. Species of flowers have been engineered in Indonesia and Japan to honor father and son - Kimilsungia and Kimjongilia. We visited the Kimilsungia Flower Festival and saw many beautiful flowers in full bloom including the flower that lives on in Kim Il Sung's name. We also visited the birthplace and first home of Kim Il Sung and watched as parades of women in beautiful traditional dresses, men in fine suits and school children in uniforms visited this monument on Kim Il Sung's 95th birthday.

One of our guides mentioned to me that he visits a statue of Kim Il Sung every Sunday to pay his respects to the father of the country. Our guide had not been able to make his usual visit to the statue the day after we arrived as he was busy with our group. The following Friday he took us to see the statue and adjoining monuments and he paid his respects at the foot of the statue which was adorned with several bouquets of flowers.

North Korea, an enigma to many Westerners, seems much more understandable to me now. Behind the stereotypes, I got to know a few of the people and learn about some of the culture and history. Having made a few new friends and enjoyed brief connections with many North Koreans, I now care much more about the potential to improve relations between our two countries.

At the end of our trip our guides helped us through airport check-in and customs and had tea with us before we boarded. Both guides waved for quite a while and then after I thought they were

gone, I saw Elder Brother come back and wave again and then I waved back and performed a few steps of Korean dance which I knew he would enjoy and for me was a way to say goodbye and show heartfelt thanks and respect to my host.

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