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My Two Korean Sojourns

Travel Story by David J. Marcou

Seoul, South Korea

In the summer of 1984, after graduating the Missouri Journalism School, I was invited to work as chief copy editor for Yonhap News Agency's International Desk in Seoul. I arrived that August and spent nine months there during my first Korean sojourn. I'd been inspired to go to Korea by my Korean friends at Mizzou and by my contact with the great British photojournalist Bert Hardy in 1981, when I photographed him for the National Portrait Gallery in London. Mr. Hardy and writing-partner James Cameron had covered the Korean War brilliantly for Britain's 'Picture Post' Magazine.

Although I was a professional wordsmith for Yonhap, I took a lot of photos whenever I could, including people on the streets, famous Koreans, still-lives, and Mother Teresa. People on the street were mainly open to being photographed, and I even made some close-up portraits there with a wide-angle lens. I've always felt comfortable doing street photos, but I also like photographing in many other situations. I generally don't direct people to do many things for my photos, but rather respond to found-circumstances, which is why I've never much liked studio-photography, and much prefer informal portraits.

In January 1985, I photographed four people worth noting: Ms. Kim Young-Im, a photographer herself; Ms. Oh, a coffee shop waitress; Ms. Oh Hye-Yong, a cancer-survivor/playwright; and Mother Teresa. Other famous people I photographed early that year included Korea's first female jurist - Lee Tai-Young. I'd already held a one-person photo-show in December 1984, at Han Madang Gallery and Coffee shop, which was well-attended, including work by my friend and Yonhap colleague, David Johns, who'd also graduated from Mizzou. I had some decent Korean friends at Yonhap, too, including Mr. Yi Do-Sun, my early guide.

In May of 1985, I headed back to the States, to recharge my energy and see about other prospects. I worked at the local historical society for a few months, before deciding to return to Seoul. A photo I'd taken had been used as the artist-portrait in Ms. Kim's brochure for her show at Pine Hill Gallery and Restaurant in Seoul. Mr. Kim Kyong-Hae's 'Business Korea' Magazine helped sponsor it. I asked Ms. Kim to give me his address, and when I contacted Mr. Kim, he said he could offer me two part-time jobs. I would work for his magazine and for the Korea Trade Promotion Corporation.

In February 1986, I returned to Seoul. Immediately, I began work on the stories I'd write for Mr. Kim's magazine. It was a very busy time, and thankfully I was not asked to write quite so much copy in the following months. Then, too, there was my KOTRA job, which amounted to nine hours a week, where I edited English-language catalog copy, wrote speeches (beyond my own, I've written only two I remember much about – the first for my sister Mary's valedictory address at Logan High School in La Crosse; the other for Cho Soon-Sung, my Korean-American Mizzou-professor's



commencement address for the University of Alaska; Prof. Cho, David Johns, and I shared the free Yonhap editors' apartment in 1984-85) and letters, and did some other tasks.

Also, with Mr. Kim's help, I published my first book, a collection of black-and-white photos I'd had printed by Grove Hardy Ltd., in London. My book 'Calling America' was one I gave to many friends in Seoul and to some libraries abroad, too. The Museum of Modern Art Library in New York City still owns a copy.

Along the way, I was also asked to write stories for Korean Air's in-flight magazine, 'Morning Calm,' and did about six reports for it, including a five-day coverage of The Philippines in the summer of 1986. Mrs. Aquino had recently become President of The Philippines, and there was an air of good-feeling there, though many people were still poor, and the night we arrived, there was a typhoon that made us take a very circuitous car-ride to our Holiday Inn in Manila. I interviewed and photographed people during the five days, which included a tour of the region south of Manila. 'Morning Calm' had me travel with its own photographer and editor, as well as Philippine tourism officials.



During my second Korean sojourn, I dated some Korean women, including an Ewha University graduate. It didn't look like we'd be getting married, so I began dating another woman, who would become my wife. I picked up additional side-jobs in Seoul, and by November 1986, I joined the 'Korea-Europe Economic Report' and left 'Business Korea'.

I'd met Edward Kim, the former 'National Geographic' photographer, who edited 'Seoul' Magazine at the time. In late winter 1987, we talked about my working for him, but he could promise very little – the off-chance I could do a little part-time work for him. I would have liked to take him up on it, because Seoul would have been a good place to be in 1988, during the Summer Olympics. However, Mr. Kim was lukewarm, and so was I, because my son was about to be born and I felt my wife and I should move to Wisconsin, where we could get support from my family and the excellent medical care in my hometown.

Two months before we departed for Wisconsin, I held a one-person show at Pine Hill, and also saw some of my work published in 'Design' Magazine. My first one-person show had been covered by the 'Korean Times' and 'Segye' Magazine; my second was covered by 'Dong-A Ilbo'.

The biggest media event I took part in, though, was not a photo-show or even a student-demonstration, of which there were many, but occurred during my first Korean sojourn --Mother Teresa's visit to her convent at Anyang, which apparently is no longer a convent. My AFP friend, Mr. Pak, his photographer, Mr. Im, and our friend, Ms. Kim, and I were driven by AFP car to the convent for a personal interview that January Sunday in 1985, and I met and made many close-up portraits of the Nobel Laureate and future saint. (Four years later, I'd send her a note wishing her better health; she replied that time and in 14 more letters, before she died.) A drove of reporters and cameramen showed up right after our interview, and en masse we covered Mother Teresa together for the next two hours, including when she jumped into a yellow VW and drove around the driveway (that picture was later lost). It was a snow-covered day, though I don't recall us having to drive through the storm, which occurred a day or two before, I believe.

We soon drove back to the AFP office in Seoul (about one hour's drive), where Mr. Kim processed all our films. We found one of my images to be very dramatic, right from the start. It's a photo of Mother Teresa smiling broadly in profile, as she is asked a question by Mr. Pak (off-camera). Mr. Pak's list of questions is on the table to her right. In the coming days and weeks, I realized I'd taken many good photos of her that day; some have been published -- in newspapers, magazines, and books, plus at least one greeting card. I've also written about that adventure often.



More than two years later, in April 1987, my wife's visa was approved, and we flew back to Wisconsin via United through Chicago. Our son, Matthew Ambrose Marcou, was born September 23, 1987, and today he attends the UM-Minneapolis, where he majors in Chemistry and works as a computer technician. My two Korean sojourns made it possible for Matthew to be born; I'll never regret having returned to Seoul for that second sojourn, and I hope my family never regrets it either.



Illustration by Bob Veon
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