The Kwangju Uprising
Eyewitness Press Accounts of Korea's Tiananmen

Foreword by President Kim Dae Jung
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I was in Japan on the morning of Monday, May 19, 1980, when I heard the first news of an uprising in Kwangju. My immediate thought was to inform the ARD-NDR German TV Hamburg News Center. Unfortunately our studio chief was out of the office, the decision was left up to me in this important situation. I knew that I had to cover the story. The news out of South Korea was sparse indeed. The government had declared a full-blooded extension of martial law, to cover the entire nation. The military authorities were censoring the press, line by line, claiming that there was a risk of “political instability.” The information blackout heightened my curiosity. I telephoned here and there. I finally managed to make some direct contact in Korea. The situation was escalating. There had been student deaths, and there were ongoing clashes between groups of students and soldiers. I phoned our News Center in Hamburg once more to receive approval to commute from Japan to Korea that very day. We agreed that I should leave Japan for Korea as soon as possible.

Not that I was comfortable with the prospect. First, it would be hard to get our material out of Korea and back to Hamburg. I would be far from Seoul, far from the only exit to the outside world at Kimpo (Seoul airport). The task ahead seemed difficult. I really had no idea how it would work out. Due to martial law there was no satellite transmission in those days. On top of that a modern satellite-transmission technology like today’s was not available. I should explain that I gathered everything on 16mm film that had to be developed before it was transmitted. Meanwhile, it was unlikely, in my view, that Korean officials would permit a German TV crew to go to Kwangju, in view of the complete censorship. But mulling over these problems wasn’t going to get me anywhere. Never giving up I was sure that I would find a way.

The main thing was that I had obtained a go-ahead from my head office to cover the news story. In fact, the ground was thus being prepared for our eventual historical TV documentary on the citizens’ uprising in Kwangju. Heartened by the approval from home, I packed up my film equipment in Tokyo. My colleague—film-cutter and sound man, Henning Rumohr—and I departed, taking minimal equipment and enough cash for an extended journey. We headed for Narita, Tokyo’s international airport. We boarded the first available flight to Seoul.
Everything went smoothly that day. At Kimpo the Korean customs officers refrained from their usual time-consuming ritual of double-checking our film and sound equipment. It was as if the media were being welcomed. Very strange, I thought. Never was the paperwork handled by Kimpo customs so swiftly, without complications of any kind. I felt uneasy. As I watched the procedures going forward, I wondered: Could there possibly be any small hope of political change, given the way Korean government officials usually behaved?

Outside, our driver Kim Sa Bok was waiting for us. We greeted each other, then sped off toward the Chosun Hotel in downtown Seoul. As we drove, Kim briefed us on the situation. It was too late to set out for Kwangju—several hundred kilometers to the south. We stayed the night at the hotel in Seoul.

Avoiding the KOIS

Normally, when I checked into Seoul, I made my presence known to the Korean Overseas Information Service (KOIS), a branch of the larger Ministry of Information and Culture, which took care of the foreign press by giving us the official accreditation papers. However, the situation being downright different on this occasion—with martial law extended to cover all South Korea, and with complete censorship of the press—I thought that it would be best to give KOIS a wide berth, not to inform them of our presence in Korea. This way we could avoid being under their control in any form.

We had taken the basic decisions. Not knowing what to expect, we would head south on the expressway, traveling by day. That was preferable. Kim, our experienced driver, agreed to this.

We departed early in the morning. We left everything behind at the hotel that we absolutely didn't need. We kept our rooms at the Chosun Hotel as it was far from certain that we would reach our destination, let alone go to work.

All routes to the south were blocked, it was said. The military had cordoned off the whole area. That was the story. However, nothing would hold me back. I was determined to get through.

One extra person joined us. He was another German correspondent from the writing press, also with an office in Tokyo. I warned him. I said that there was absolutely no guarantee that we would get through to Kwangju. We saw as much as we got onto the expressway. The sign on the expressway said “CLOSED.” Yet our driver Kim was not put off. We sailed down an empty highway. That deserted expressway gave me the strangest feeling. Surely, we would be stopped.

After driving for an hour, we encountered detour signs. Kim paid no attention, he kept heading straight for Kwangju. With my camera at the ready, I sat in front watching out for anything of interest. Still, we kept driving on and on. Finally, about seventy-five kilometers short of Kwangju, we ran into a roadblock manned by armed soldiers. They gave the car a thorough inspection and waved us through. We continued, barreling down the expressway. Somehow we had learned that all traffic was being halted at a tunnel about thirty kilometers ahead. Very well, we would press on.

At the tunnel entrance we encountered heavily armed soldiers. This was different. There were at least fifteen heavy tanks parked in the opposite lane. This time, we had no choice but to obey. An officer in charge had his men aim their machine guns at our car just in case we were in doubt.

What should we do? Kim consulted with the local farmers. We were soon on our way again. We pressed on by small side roads, heading past more paddies. But once again, we ran into soldiers. Every possible way into Kwangju was being sealed off. That was the impression.

I decided on a new strategy. I invented a story on the spot: We were looking for our boss. We had lost him in the vicinity. We must go through to find him. That was our obligation. We couldn’t abandon our chief.

The ploy worked, as was later reported on the front page of No. 1 Shim bun, the monthly journal of The Foreign Correspondents’ Club of Japan (see vol. 12, no. 5). The paper reported:

That a good story, well told, still may work miracles was proven by the German TV crew that parleyed its way past a full-fledged (Korean) army major and several other manned checkpoints by insisting with those big, blue German eyes that they were not—of course not—going to shoot any film, but that they had to enter Kwangju to extricate their boss, who was trapped in a hostile environment. Theirs was a humanitarian mission—
not a journalistic one. They kept arguing with the soldiers until they were finally waved through.

**Entering the City**

Back we went onto the now deserted highway. The road was partly blocked. There was a makeshift barrier or two, composed of sand, stones and other debris, dumped there by the rebel citizens of Kwangju. We made our way past these obstacles, without difficulty.

We were now only a short distance from Kwangju. We proceeded very slowly and carefully. I had fixed our German TV flag on the car. I believed that a display of the national colors of Germany would help us. It would distinguish our car from a military vehicle of any description. We drove on, and a very short time after passing the barricades we met an oncoming, motley cavalcade. It consisted of a city bus lacking side windows, decorated with the Korean national flag; a military truck, obviously captured; and a jeep, carrying five armed people. As they approached us, we could see that the bigger vehicles were crammed with young men and students wearing headbands, armed with nothing more than sticks or small axes. They sang as they came. They were welcoming us. They stopped, and we too pulled up. With my colleague Henning I climbed onto the truck. I wanted to film them as we drove into town.

Up there on the truck the students wearing headbands were singing the national anthem of Korea. They waved the national Taekukki flag, as they sang. The young people on the bus beat time with their sticks, setting up a rhythm. Behind the bus followed the jeep, with its helmeted crew. I felt an overwhelming sense of hope, seeing these young people.

That first impression was not to last for long.

Entering the city, while still on the outskirts somewhere, we were immediately surrounded by a large crowd. There were thousands of people, young and old. Out of that vast throng, a man approached. He spoke in broken English. He was nervous. His body trembled. He was frequently overtaken by emotion, as he described the events of the night before. Many of his friends had been shot, he said. The hospitals were crammed with wounded. There was no space for them all, no way to nurse the wounded. Calming down, he then explained that the citizens really had no way to survive. The military was using weapons with night sights, capable of seeing through the darkness. There was nowhere to go, nowhere to hide from the bullets.

We drove next to a city hospital, entering by the back. It was a painful experience. People—relatives and friends—showed me their loved ones. They opened many, many of the coffins, set out in rows. Most of the bodies were those of very young people, no doubt students. They all had head wounds. They had died as a result of brutal beatings. It was hard to hold back my tears. I filmed what I could of this sad sight. Never in my life—never in Vietnam—had I seen anything like this. I was overwhelmed by mixed feelings of anger and sympathy.

What I saw on that first day in Kwangju wore me out. Night came. None of us dared to go out. There was shooting going on, somewhere in the darkness. Machine guns, by the sound of them. The hours of darkness flew by. The night seemed very short. I got up early the next day, still in darkness, listening to the sound of gunfire.

**Beating the Print Media**

My colleagues had not awakened. I had time to think, as the sun rose. The shooting we had heard before had stopped. It was Wednesday, May 21, which happened to be Buddha’s Birthday, usually a happy day filled with colorful celebrations. An immediate concern pressed upon me. What I had collected on sound reels and on film had to be shared with the rest of the world by being broadcast. I had to get my exposed film to the news center at NDR in Hamburg, Germany. I counted my film cans, figuring out whether my material would suffice. That afternoon, I would leave the city. I tried, once more, to telephone my head office in Hamburg. No good, the lines were dead.

Those cut-off lines put me in an unusual situation. Normally, TV could not compete with print media in those days in getting a first crack at a story. Film had to be shipped and developed. That took time. However, newspaper people needed telephones. There were none or at least they were cut off. I could be the newspapers to it, for once. Timing is all in the news business. I was fairly certain that the phone lines would stay down for a good while. I had to get my material out there myself to be broadcasted. What is the value of a story, what is its impact if it is not being distributed by television to the world?

Before we left Kwangju, though, I wanted to film a few more scenes. After a quick breakfast we headed for the Provincial Hall, the center of the city. Kim Sa Bok, our driver; knew the way.

The building had been taken over by the students and citizens. They
were using it as a command HQ. Access was restricted. The building was in use, I saw, as a distribution point for food, drinks, and other supplies. There were big trucks. Jeeps were entering and exiting the compound. On the left side of the rambling building, people were piling up weapons and military materiel, close to an entrance way and a guard's booth. Two young people wearing fire helmets stood on sentry duty. They were armed with rifles. They had a list on hand to control incoming and outgoing vehicles. Trucks which wanted to get in just blew their horns, and were given clearance to enter. Crowds of people had gathered in front of the building, presumably to exchange news. Many were lined up along a wall. There were signboards and handwritten notices.

A blue truck came in. On the back were four bodies, stretched out. I followed it until it stopped. The truck had gone round the side of the building. At the back, I saw corpses lying in a row on white sheets. The newly arrived dead were unloaded carefully and lined up with their comrades. There did not seem to be any relatives or friends around, as far as I could see. Were these the victims of the previous night's forays? Some of the dead bodies being unloaded had been smashed beyond recognition. I was overcome by a desire to vomit.

I turned away. Back in front of the building my eyes lit on some long blue banners. They were ornamented with big white hangul letters (Korean written characters).

"Hopefully into the Eighties!"

A friendly young man who translated the banners for me volunteered the information that by now the whole city was under the control of the students and citizens, more or less, he said.

It was time to get on. I had to find a tall building, something higher than the three-story Provincial Hall. I wanted to shoot some general overviews of the city. We set out in search of such a place. We passed by a television station. It was in bad shape. In fact the burned-out shell of MBC-TV or Channel 9 in Korea bore signs of fire at every window. I had already filmed this building, to show what had transpired in the early days of the uprising.

At this point, still searching for the right building, we ran into two Americans. They were working for Amnesty International, they said. They had seen the first two days of the uprising, when violence had suddenly peaked. Their remarks, which we filmed on top of a nearby building, bore witness to just how violent the military had been in the opening phase of the troubles.

There were important testimonies, there having been few foreigners in the city that we knew of or could reach.

Meanwhile, we had to get out of there. We had to depart Kwangju to stand a chance of reaching Seoul in daylight hours. My colleague and I decided to film just two more spots: one, an open food market; the other, a large street barricade, near an overpass, with a distant view of tanks. Unfortunately, even with my long lens, it was impossible to show that background. I concentrated on the immediate vicinity, filming a barricade built out of tree trunks.

The market, meanwhile, was nothing more nor less than a peaceful open-air market. Nothing abnormal pertained to the place. One saw no signs of grief, no uncertainty. Every sort of fruit and vegetable was on sale. That market proved that life went on in Kwangju.

It was time to go. We had a quick drink in the market. I sorted my film, putting the film I had just exposed into the original cans and boxes. I hid my exposed film in its original packaging, as if it were unexposed.

I took greatest care with the film shot on the previous day. I had five crucial reels. I stuck these under my T-shirt. This film I wanted to save at all costs, even if the rest was confiscated.

Going out of Kwangju we followed the route we had used coming in. We passed by the emde barricades. Thereupon, we had to reenter the area controlled by the military. We were stopped, and we were checked once more, very carefully. We had to get out of the car, while the soldiers examined our belongings. They looked closely at my wrapped film. Finding nothing wrong, they allowed us to carry on. Thereafter, the checkpoints were less arduous. Still, they took time. We finally arrived back in Seoul at nearly 11 P.M.

The next morning, early, I booked a return flight to Tokyo. I would travel first-class on Japan Air Lines. With luck, my status as a first-class passenger would help me. My plan was to get my film out in my carry-on luggage. I had once again repacked my film. This time in a big metal can, with the film tucked in between cookies and wrapped nicely in strong, golden metal foil—with lots of green ribbons—a wedding gift complete with decorations. The wrapping proved to be so impressive, when the moment came, that I sailed past the security officers. Once on board the plane I took stock. I had been lucky on this last stage.

Arriving in Narita, I handed over my wedding present to my staff. They in turn forwarded the film to our news center in Hamburg. The
footage aired several times in Germany as well as on Eurovision and in the United States.

Taking immediately a return flight three hours later, I was back in Seoul on Thursday afternoon, May 22.

A Second Trip to Kwangju

In Seoul once more, I was preparing for a second trip to Kwangju on the early morning of Friday, May 23 and needed to get in some additional supplies. I was searching for these in one of the underground shopping arcades near the hotel when someone thrust into my hand a leaflet with an interview with Kim Young Sam, the long-established opposition leader. That surprised me. The nation was under martial law. All political activities were banned, the National Assembly was not in session, universities and schools were closed indefinitely, and the media, of course, were censored.

Yet here was some seditious literature. In an interview dated Tuesday, May 20—three days after twenty-six people, including Kim Dae Jung, had been arrested for allegedly manipulating the troubles in Kwangju and creating “social unrest”—Kim Young Sam was quoted as saying “This is really time to think of the nation’s future. It is not too late for those in authority to use reason and bring martial law to an end in order to return the nation to normalcy. Before it is too late the armed forces should return to their normal duties. Kim Dae Jung and others arrested should be released immediately.”

Reading this statement—I received a copy in English and another in Korean, handwritten and signed by Kim Young Sam—it occurred to me to hide a copy in my luggage, to show to people in Kwangju. I buried the materials deep in my luggage, together with Western and Japanese newspapers I had smuggled back from Narita. I had bought the papers, eager to get hold of unfiltered reports and uncensored information on Korea. I was lucky enough to have succeeded in getting these papers through the customs at Kimpo.

The local Seoul press told one nothing. The papers carried only threats and warnings from the Martial Law Command. The headline of the Korea Times for May 22 read: “Six Killed—Riot Demonstrations Grip Kwangju Area for four days—Martial Law Forces to Take Necessary Steps on Riots.”

The paper carried a picture of Martial Law Commander General Lee Hui Sung. He was appearing on national TV-KBS, to deliver this statement: “The martial law forces retain the right to take measures necessary for their self-defense against violent acts undermining national security and order.”

I knew what that meant. The implications of this statement were clear. The threats were to be carried out. Indeed, threats of such a nature inevitably get acted upon. It was exceedingly unlikely that the military would give way or become “rational” (in Kim Young Sam’s word). The chances of any immediate move toward democracy—say the adoption of a democratic constitution—were very low.

A bloody confrontation was the only possible outcome in Kwangju, I considered, reading the press between the lines. That was unfortunate. I decided to set out for Kwangju again forthwith, determined to document the events threatened on film.

One other piece of literature came into my hands just before my departure. It came from the Korean Overseas Information Service (KOIS). Someone slid it under my door at the Chosun Hotel the morning before I wanted to leave for Kwangju again. It was no doubt intended for foreign correspondents and press people. I read it at once. The first sentence claimed that there had been no casualties resulting from clashes among the “rioters” and the military in Kwangju. The notice went on to claim that casualties had been caused by reckless firing of weapons among the “rioters.” From what I had seen already, this seemed extremely unlikely to me, to put it mildly. Young people in Korea are all taught to handle weapons. They all receive military training, both at school and in the armed forces. The notice claimed that the high casualties stemmed from the general “chaos” that beset the city. These were grotesque falsifications. They made me even more eager than before to prove their inaccuracy by seeing it with my own eyes, so to speak, with my camera.

We started back down to Kwangju at 10:30 on the morning of Friday, May 23. It was another sunny day. This time, once again, I was not hopeful of reaching my destination. The military had strengthened its positions around the city. I assumed that the cordon around Kwangju must be well-nigh perfect. Yet the trip went smoothly. We joined in a convoy of Red Cross vehicles (three cars transporting medicine, blood plasma, and other supplies to the Provincial Hall) for the first 200 kilometers. Luckily, the soldiers at all checkpoints so far had just waved us through.

Some twenty-six kilometers short of Kwangju we were obliged to
break away from the convoy after being stopped. But fortunately, the soldier we were dealing with spoke English. I pulled out a copy of the Korea Herald of May 18.

The newspaper carried on its first page the following assertion: "The freedom of travel of foreigners will be assured to the maximum." That rather shocked the soldier. With this document in hand, I was able to convince him that foreigners were permitted to travel freely, even under martial law. The man took the newspaper away with him and showed it to one of his comrades. He came back smiling. We were to pass through. The fact that Kim Sa Bok, our driver, was Korean was overlooked.

This time we drove directly to the center of town, past the barricades we had seen on our first visit. We parked on the square in front of the Provincial Hall. I was overjoyed to be back. People were, I saw, gathering for a rally. A crowd of some 15,000 to 20,000 citizens stood in front of the Provincial Hall, on the square, and in the surrounding streets. They listened attentively to student speakers, who were advocating the creation of a committee to represent all classes of Kwangju citizens.

I filmed a mother, deeply moved by the loss of her only son.

"What have we done wrong? Why did the paratroopers come? They were drunk. We should not be afraid, we too should be ready to die for the ideal of political freedom."

She carried on: "I am proud of the citizens of Kwangju, even though I am not from here. We should negotiate with the military, to seek a compromise for all of us. Everything depends on maintaining our unity."

As the rally came to an end, the crowd sang the national anthem. Everyone was deeply moved. So was I. But there was tension. What would the future bring? Would the military, having once withdrawn, now listen to proposals from the citizens?

Answers came there none.

In the meantime, there was a plan to gather up weapons. Here was evidence of a wish to compromise, or at least to avoid a final clash that the military must win. Two students most probably selected from the Settlement Committee stood on a raised platform, and received weapons being handed over to them. There were piles of light machine guns and other light arms and ammunition on the ground in front of the Provincial Hall.

Yet what of the hopes for a compromise? On the next morning, Saturday, May 26, I set off early, going to the office of the Settlement Committee. It was located on the second floor of the Provincial Hall. Were they in contact with the military? In the office was a hotline, the only functioning phone in the city. Up to this time it had been little used, I understood. It was a direct line to the military.

People gathered round. There were some students, teachers, a priest and other citizens. They gathered at about 11:40 A.M. that morning. All wore sashes as badges of office. There was a spokesman, an old man. He sat near the phone and picked up the receiver. It took a while before anyone answered. The committee spokesman then explained: An effort was being made to gather looted arms. As long as shooting continued, he said, there could be no resolution of the conflict. Another committee person took the phone. He asked the military commander on the other end of the line to do nothing until he received another call.

"If you have any questions, please call again," he said. These were the last words spoken on the hotline to the military side.

As the man hung up, I noticed a clock on the wall. It was five minutes to midday—five minutes to 12. A fitting omen, so I felt.

Indeed, the line was never used again. Hopes for a political solution were dashed. They were finally destroyed a few days later—on the early morning of Tuesday, May 27—when the military stormed the city.

The hope of a political spring in Korea, a thaw, was thus destroyed. However, those days in Kwangju will live in people's memories.

**An Endpiece**

Since early on in my time in Korea I always kept an eye on the hard-pressed opposition and its leaders. During the presidency of Park Chung Hee and under his military successors I observed the efforts of Kim Dae Jung to strengthen his weak position. I followed his conflicts with the government of South Korea. At the same time I kept up with a range of political and nonpolitical topics, such as the intensive effort at economic development, and I followed cultural events. I excluded no subjects of interest from my coverage, especially for Germany and for people overseas.

Now looking back on those days when human rights and hopes for political freedom and justice were suppressed by the will of one leader I, as a foreign journalist, recall my own bad experience. Mostly, all the terrible things happened to Koreans. But they also befell a foreign newsman.

Six years had passed since the Kwangju uprising. On November 28, 1986, I was filming opposition New Korea Democratic Party (NKDP)
members led by Shin Soon Bum on the streets in Seoul. They were being attacked by plainclothes policemen, while distributing leaflets near the Kwanghamun crossroads.

I was the only TV cameraman in sight gathering this news with my videocamera; besides me there was only a still photographer from Hong Kong out there. I was wearing an armband to show that I had official accreditation as a foreign newsman. My camera was clearly marked with the name of ARD NDR German TV network. That wasn't about to impress anybody, when plainclothes policemen knocked me down all of a sudden.

Some thugs and plainclothesmen hustled me across the street into the tender care of some riot police just arriving on the spot. They got me down on the ground and proceeded to kick. They broke my video camera and the battery light. Yet, that sturdy camera, I believe, saved my life. I used it to cover my face and head. They used their boots to kick at me all over. The camera served as a shield of a sort. Nevertheless, I suffered severe head, neck, and back injuries. I had bruises all over my body. I was rushed by my Korean researcher and driver Mrs. Shin Nanja to the Red Cross hospital in Pyongdong, Seoul, bleeding from my nose and my ears, struggling to breathe.

The facts of the attack on me were immediately conveyed to the German Embassy in Seoul and to the German writing press. No comment was offered, ever, by the Korean authorities either at the time or later. Despite official notifications in writing given by German TV to the German Foreign Ministry back in Bonn and subsequently to the Korean government through diplomatic channels, this was not the end of the matter for me. I suffered from increasing pains and aches. Finally, a decade later, I underwent a complex and rather dangerous operation to my cervical vertebrae. It brought only a little relief. After a year of rehabilitation, I finally had to give up my job for good.

I was being taught a lesson, paid back I should say. The Korean authorities monitored the foreign press closely in those days. Even since my coverage of the Kwangju uprising I had been a thorn in the flesh of the powers that were in Seoul. However, that same uprising was a turning point in modern Korean history. I was deeply touched by what I saw of it. Some of the images that I caught on film—a family grieving over the shooting of their eldest son; a mother who lost both her sons—etched themselves into my mind. I will never forget what I saw. I bow my head to those who lost their lives in the hope of creating a democracy in Korea and setting aside a military dictatorship serving the ambitions of one general!