

RESTORING DIGNITY: KOREA

REMEMBERING GWANGJU

THIRTY-ONE YEARS AGO, on May 18, 1980, students and citizens of Gwangju, South Korea united in the Gwangju Democratization Movement, and rose up against Chun Doo-hwan's military dictatorship in an incident known as the Gwangju Uprising. Within ten days, however, the movement had been brutally crushed, with hundreds of citizens beaten to death in the streets or slaughtered by paratroopers with bayonets. Thousands were injured or tortured in prisons. Citizens who questioned the official figures of 165 citizens dead, 65 missing, and service casualties of 23 soldiers and four policemen, were subject to arrest; the actual death toll has been estimated at between 1,000 and 2,000 people. While the survivors and victims' families have suffered physically and mentally until this day, the Gwangju Uprising and Democratization Movement has largely been forgotten by the Western world, unlike the Tiananmen massacre nine years later, which is still covered prominently by Western media. That is why, from October to early December 2009, and for three weeks in 2010, my Korean wife and I visited Gwangju to research and photograph for my self-funded project, "Remembering Gwangju."

THESE PHOTOGRAPHS feature locations related to the uprising, interwoven with portraits of participants, accompanied by their own statements on their experiences and memories. Even though it often made them literally sick to dig out painful memories of personal horrors, many graciously gave their time, often talking for hours. I have the deepest respect and admiration for these courageous people, who, despite their immense sufferings, are modest, soft-spoken and noble.

IN AUTUMN AND WINTER, the ambient light in Gwangju has a special quality. Whereas in Japan it can be sharp and harsh, here the light is creamy soft, low-contrast but still brilliant, even on an overcast day. At around 4 pm, when most of these portraits were taken (with a cumbersome 4 x 5 view camera), the light was perfect for capturing the somber mood I sought in my photos. Through the series, "Remembering Gwangju," I hope to keep alive the memory of those ten tragic days in May, 1980.

—Matthias Ley



PARK SANG-CHOL

On May 21, 1980, a 14-year-old boy living near the Provincial Hall went there to watch the demonstrations. Park Sang-chol was standing to one side when the soldiers suddenly opened fire on the crowds, killing and wounding many. "Everywhere was blood and screaming, and everybody tried to run for safety," Park recalls. He was shot in the spine, and has been confined to a wheelchair ever since. To this day Park suffers extreme nonstop pain, and he needs 500 heavy painkillers every month. Because of the pills, he has difficulty waking up in the morning. And since the number of pills obtainable from one hospital is much less than his needs, he has to collect his medication by visiting several. Once a year Park has to go to Seoul for two months of treatment, and ten years ago he was treated in the U.S., but the pain persists.

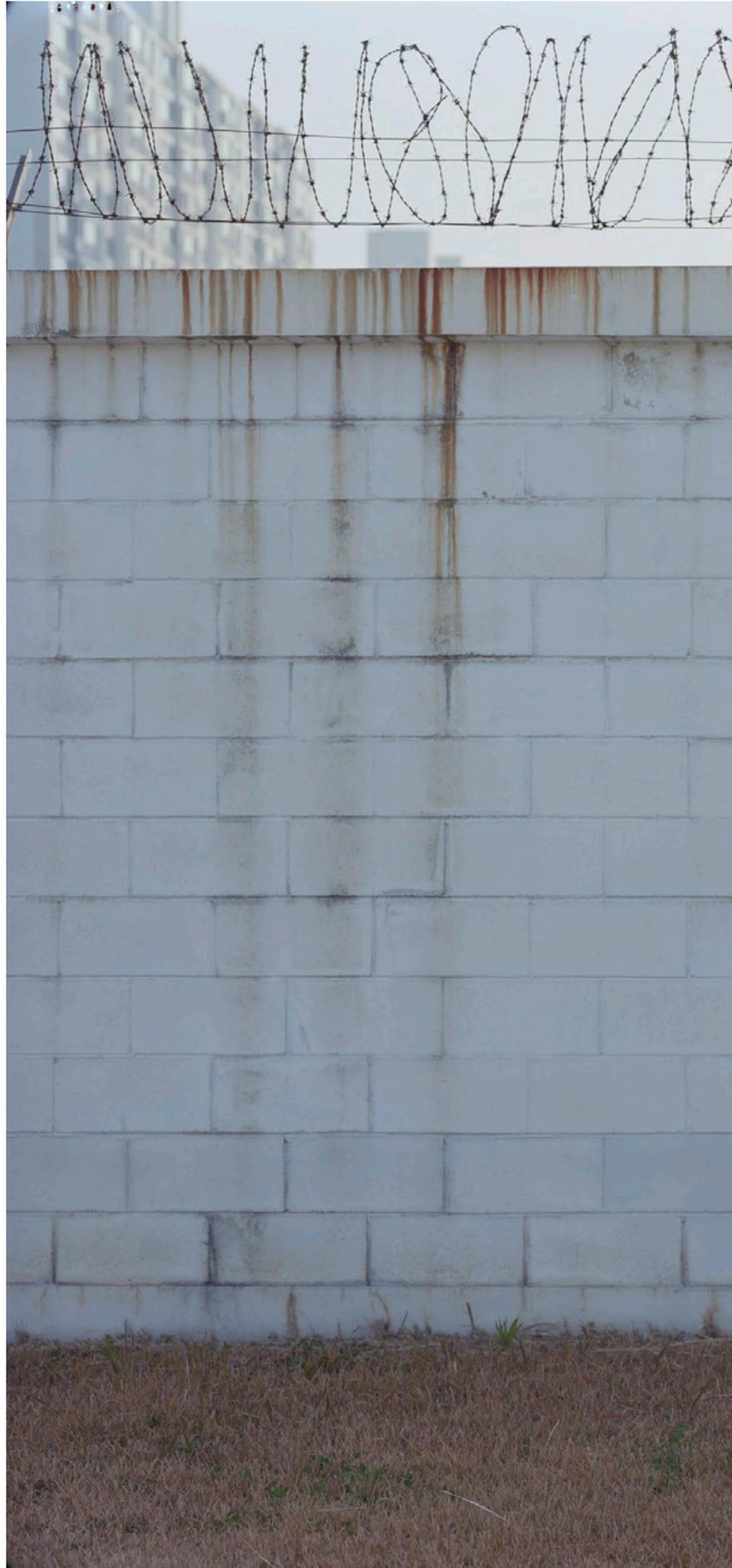


YOON JE-CHEON & JANG MYEONG-HUN

Yoon Je-cheon (right) and Jang Myeong-hun (left) were taxi drivers in May 1980; both joined the uprising. Yoon Je-cheon was pulled out of his taxi and severely beaten, resulting in many broken bones. He managed to escape and stumbled home, where he hid, terrified, not even daring to go to hospital. Yoon was unable to work for one year. On May 20, Jang Myeong-hun joined a big taxi and bus convoy which drove to the Provincial Hall. "Near the Cheonil Building," he says, "I was attacked by paratroopers and nearly killed, but some brave citizens rescued me." Both men still require weekly hospital treatments for pain and other symptoms.

KANG GIL-JO

On May 18, in front of the Chonnam University intersection, students were battling paratroopers. "I had helped students escape in my car on several occasions," Kang Gil-jo says. Because he had a car, the soldiers mistook him for a student leader, smashed the windows and pulled him out. "They beat me until I lost consciousness," Kang says. "When I woke up, I was on a very slowly moving military truck, and there were several lifeless bodies on top of me." The truck was completely sealed, and some soldiers sprinkled tear gas powder into it and amused themselves by watching the prisoners' agony. "I tried to breathe, my eyes were burning," Kang says. "After arriving at Gwangju Prison, I saw many dead bodies on that truck." There was a mock execution. Life in Gwangju Prison was hell. The prisoners were tortured and systematically de-humanized. Kang Gil-jo later testified: "We clamored for water... after having none for several days. A paratrooper said, 'Give them piss'. Another soldier relieved himself in a glass and handed it to us. One of the citizens grabbed it and drank as if he were drinking cold water... We were no longer human beings, we were animals... We ate and went to the bathroom amidst corpses... We had to crawl to the toilet one by one and come back with excrement on our tongues."







MOON GWI-DEOK

Moon Gwi-deok, now 80, is clearly still traumatized by the loss of her youngest child. On May 21, 1980, seventeen-year-old Park Geum-hee secretly donated blood at the Christian Hospital as she had done on previous days. On her way home, paratrooper snipers ambushed her bus, killing the young high school student. "My daughter just wanted to donate blood," her mother says. "She was an active girl, a good and well-liked student." Moon Gwi-deok recalls that it was her daughter's dream to find a good job after graduation, so "we all could move to a bigger house." "After they killed my child," Moon Gwi-deok says, "everything died inside me." Today she suffers from heart problems, other serious ailments, and depression.



IM YOUNG-SOO

Im Young-Soo was 26 years old, had just finished his mandatory military service and was looking for a job. "After seeing students brutally being beaten on May 17," he explained, "I joined the uprising." On May 22 he was shot twice in the left leg in front of Provincial Hall. While he was lying defenceless on the ground, some paratroopers beat him and stabbed him in the ribs and back. When Im Young Soo grabbed the bayonet with his bare hands to avoid further stabbing, one soldier got really angry and slammed the butt of a gun into his head. The injuries are still visible today. Later, he was arrested, interrogated, tortured and was twice put in solitary confinement.



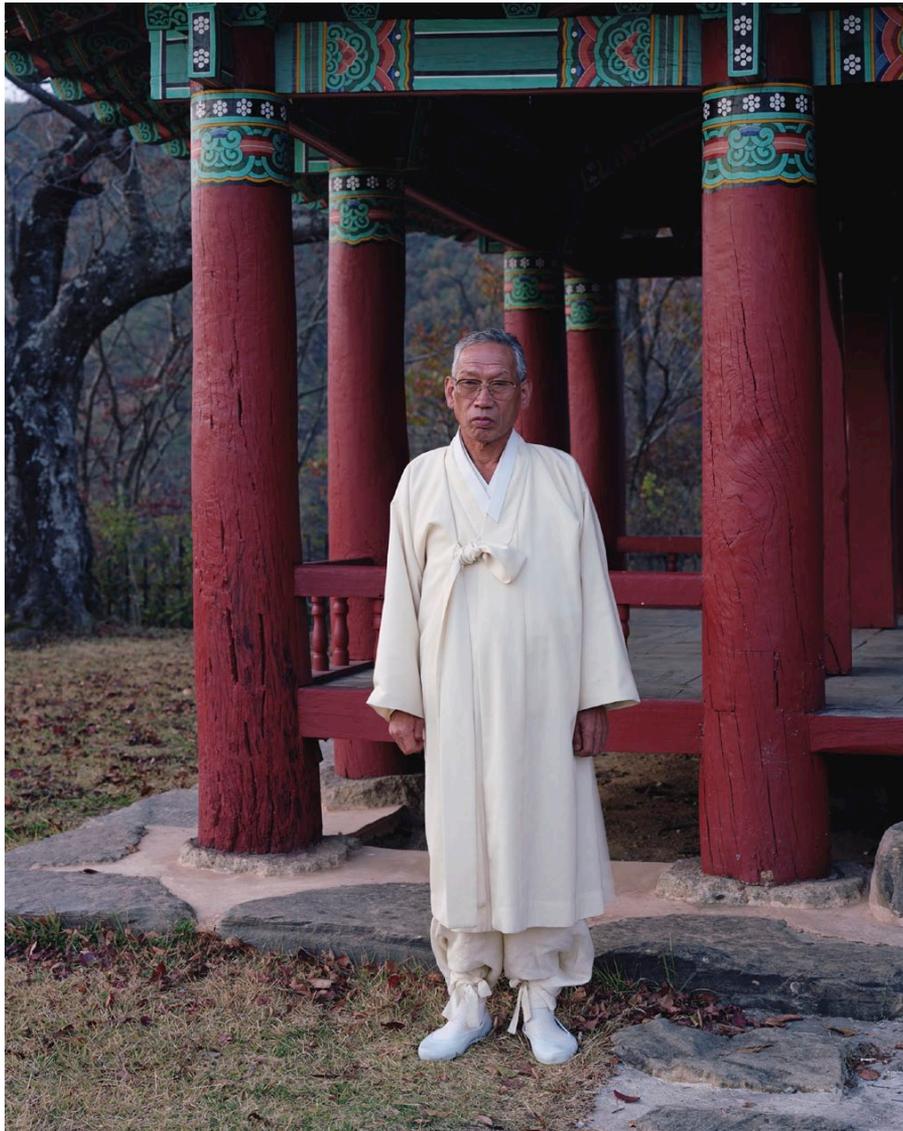


TORTURE AND INTERROGATION ROOM, 505 BLDG.

KIM BYEONG-RYEOL

Kim Byeong-ryeol was 17 years old, a high school student working part-time in the Hotel Mido on Gunnamro Avenue. "Because the soldiers thought that some protesters had fled into the hotel, they came in searching for them," he says. "I and other staff were grabbed by the soldiers and taken outside. In the parking lot I saw the body of a taxi driver who had been beaten to death. We had to kneel down in a side street of Gunnamro Avenue. They bound our hands behind our backs with our belts, and we had to kneel on the asphalt with our faces down. If you moved just a bit, the soldiers would beat you for one or two hours. We were made to kneel like this for several hours, and my legs grew

numb. There was the constant noise of soldiers kicking, the sounds of beatings and screams. Of course I dared not look up," Kim recalls. The arrested were put on military trucks and transported first to the Provincial Hall, later to Sang-mudae Prison. "At Sang-mudae, we had to kneel in that same uncomfortable position again nonstop for 2 nights and 3 days," Kim remembers. "Again, my legs hurt and they fell asleep, my body was in pain, but I couldn't sleep at all. We were not even allowed to move our eyes. I could hear how the soldiers beat someone nearby to death. We were all terrorized, full of fear. We thought we'd never get out of there alive."



JANG DU-SUK

Jang Du-suk, born in 1938, says he had already started his underground activities back in 1960. Before the Gwangju Uprising, he fled the town to avoid being arrested. While he was on the run, his wife and son were beaten and arrested, their house searched. During the days of the uprising, he hid during the daytime and at night he printed and distributed antigovernment leaflets and pamphlets. Although he was a member of the Citizens Settlement Committee, "I kept my gun," he says. On June 21, he was finally caught. "Because the military needed a scapegoat," Jang remembers, "I admitted to all charges. But when I was tortured in prison, I did not sign my confession." In court, Jang called out to the judges: "How can you judge me when all you know is killing people!" After appealing to a higher court, his first sentence of 20 years in prison was finally reduced to three years. Then on October 8, 1980, he was pardoned and released. The police and secret service, however, continued to observe him until 1991.



MAY MOTHERS

Wahn Sung-rae (third from right) was a nurse at the Christian Hospital during the uprising in Gwangju. She and her colleagues treated about five hundred patients every day. Several times, until June, a 505 secret police team from Seoul visited her at the hospital, always at night. They threatened her and demanded access to patients' records. "The police wanted to identify student leaders, and take them to the Army Hospital for interrogation," she says. Her mother was famous at that time, so they did not dare to touch her, but threatened her family and friends. Wahn Sung-rae bravely resisted all threats, and never gave up even a single patient to the authorities.

After the uprising, Wahn continued to be active in the Movement for Democracy. In 1990, she visited Argentina, where in the '70s and '80s thousands of men, women and children disappeared during the reign of the military junta. The victims' mothers had built "Mother Houses" where they could meet, and Wahn was very impressed with them. Inspired by these women in Argentina, she opened her May Mother House in Gwangju in 1996. Twice a week, up to sixty Korean ladies meet there to talk, to support each other and to do yoga together.



PARK NAM-SUN

In 1980 Park Nam-sun, here photographed on the roof of the Provincial Hall, was already a powerful and well-connected man. “When I learned that my younger brother had been seriously beaten by paratroopers on May 18th,” Park says, “I was enraged. Some friends and I went out in the streets looking for some soldiers we could attack.” On May 21, Park witnessed the shooting of demonstrators in front of the Provincial Hall, “and we started to think how we could defend ourselves against this strong military threat.” They went to the Asia Motors factory to get some armored trucks and armed themselves with weapons stolen from police stations and army depots. Moreover they installed a heavy machine gun on the roof of Chonnam University Hospital, “and we fired it from there towards the Provincial Hall, which was still occupied by the military.” At 5.30 pm, the soldiers started to retreat, and Gwangju was briefly liberated, for just five days. The next day, Park Nam-sun became

the leader of the Citizens’ Army, headquartered in the Provincial Hall.

During the final assault on the Provincial Hall in the early morning hours of May 27, Park Nam-sun moved up to the second floor. “The paratroopers were everywhere in the dark building,” Park remembers. “There was gunfire from every direction. It was hard to tell friend from enemy. Then I heard a soldier shouting at me, ‘Don’t move,’ and I was arrested.”

In the 505 building he was tortured many times. “They drilled needles under my fingernails,” Park says, “and I lost all my teeth due to the beatings.” He was moved around various prisons, and on October 23 sentenced to death. “My wrists and ankles were tied together,” he says, “so I could only move like a puppet. After I complained that I was not allowed to see my family, they put me and three other people in a room of the size of a door. There were icicles hanging from the ceiling, and we had to eat like dogs.”

MATTHIAS LEY, a longtime contributor to KJ, lived nearly 20 years in Kyoto and Tokyo. Developing a healthy distrust in the authorities after the lies and cover-ups of previous nuclear accidents in Japan, he left Japan 5 days after Fukushima. He now lives in Munich, and plans to continue to do photo-projects in Japan and Korea.