

The program you're about to see and hear is about a real event that is, I'm afraid, typical of war.

It's about the violence, death, and innocent suffering that is part of wars, wherever they're fought. It is not intended to fix blame nor to vilify any group of people, but rather to be honest and open about what people do to one another in war, even when some of them are Americans fighting for a noble cause. Our hope is not to arouse guilt or shame, but to raise awareness and concern, that we may be moved to look for things we can do to *relieve* some of the suffering of past wars and to *reduce* the chances of inflicting similar harm in the future.

The Korean people have a long history of suffering caused by oppression, violence and war. It's a small country, sandwiched strategically between China and Japan, and bordering on the easternmost end of the Russian empire.

Since ancient times Korea has lived the shadow of its more powerful neighbors, sometimes falling under the control of one or another, and occasionally being the battleground for conflicts between them.

The Korean rulers *themselves* inflicted violence and suffering on the people as they fought among themselves and struggled to stay in power over their independent-minded subjects.

When Westerners first entered Korea, they were viewed as a threat to the Korean way of life, and were met by fierce and deadly resistance.

This painting, at the entrance of the Christian Martyrs Museum, shows Rev. Robert Thomas, the first Protestant missionary to Korea. He sailed into the country in 1866 on an armed American merchant ship, which was attacked by Korean troops and set on fire.

Rev. Thomas was tossing Bibles to Koreans who were standing on the bank.

He jumped off the ship, was captured and killed.

Although Rev. Thomas was the first *Protestant* martyr in Korea, many Catholic Christians had been killed over the decades before and after, – both Western missionaries, and at least 8,000 Korean converts to the faith.

A hundred Catholic martyrs have been canonized as saints, and yet more were beatified by Pope Francis last summer.

Presbyterian missionaries went to Korea in 1885, after a treaty had been negotiated allowing Americans to enter the country

Soon afterwards, Chinese and Japanese armies battled over control of Korea.

miners

The Japanese triumphed, and over the next fifty years, they took increasing control over Korea, eventually annexing it as a province of Japan.

Japanese rule lasted from 1905 until the end of World War II, in 1945.

Right from the start, the Korean people resented and resisted their foreign overlords.

Here you see a group of Korean men, forced by Japanese soldiers to work in a gold mine.

The Bible message, so recently introduced into Korea,

promised relief from oppressive foreign rule

- for the Hebrews enslaved in Egypt,
- for the Judean population exiled in Babylon,
- for the Jews and gentiles under the yoke of the Roman empire.

Christian churches and their leaders were at the center of agitation for Korean freedom.

A significant example was the nationwide demonstrations that began on March 1, 1919.

March 1
demon-
stration

Thirty three prominent leaders, fifteen of them Protestant Christians,

issued a bold statement proclaiming Korean independence,

and turned themselves in to the Japanese police.

Copies of the statement were read to crowds in cities and villages across the country,

and over the next two months,

perhaps two million Koreans joined in peaceful demonstrations.

The Japanese military and police reacted with force,

firing into the crowds and arresting thousands of demonstrators.

An estimated 7,500 people were killed,

and over 15,000 were arrested, many of whom were tortured or died in prison.

Of the organizers and leaders of the March 1 independence movement,

about 70% were Christians,

though Christians made up only a small percentage of the population.

Brutal Japanese rule continued in Korea through World War II.

Korean men were forced into construction work,

building Japanese military bases in China and on islands in the Pacific.

And many Korean women were forced to service Japanese soldiers

as what were politely called “comfort women.”

Battle
scene

Korean

Since 2007, a group of these women – now referred to as “grandmothers,”
assemble every Wednesday with their supporters in front of the Japanese embassy
to demand an apology for their shameful treatment,

Grand
Grand
mothers

and compensation for their humiliation and suffering.

One might think that with the defeat of the Japanese in 1945,
the terrible sufferings of the Korean people would be over.

But that was not to be!

The Russians declared war on Japan just a few days before the Japanese surrender,
and for their efforts, Russian troops got to occupy the northern half of the Korean peninsula.

Korea map

The U.S. troops occupying the south half of Korea put a new government in power there
that combined Korean national fervor and strong anti-communist sentiments
– a government that turned out to be very authoritarian.

This U.S.-supported Korean government and the American occupation authorities
vigorously suppressed movements promoting the interests of the poor farmers
– that was too “communist”!

or that pressed for greater democracy – that was a threat to the government!

On Jeju Island, a popular honeymoon destination off the southern tip of the Korean peninsula,

which my wife Sandy visited, on a trip to Korea in 2000,
the traditionally marginalized, independent-minded population of the island

resented the decision of the U.S. occupation government

to hold elections to form a separate country in South Korea,

rather than continuing to push for a united Korea.

On March 1, 1948, crowds gathered to commemorate the liberation of Korea from Japanese rule,

and to demonstrate in favor of reunification.

The demonstration was renewed early in April.

With the support of U.S. occupation forces,

Korean police fired on the demonstrators, killing six islanders,

and a full-scale revolt broke out, certainly led by left-wing groups,

but supported by a large proportion of the population of that impoverished region.

Mainland troops were sent, and during the battles that followed,

over half the villages on the island were burned to the ground.

Cemetery

After the island was subdued, for decades Koreans were forbidden to even *mention* the uprising!

Half a century later, in 2003 the president of Korea apologized to the people of the island, saying, “Due to wrongful decisions of the government,

many innocent people of Jeju suffered many casualties and destruction of their homes.”

A later investigation by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission for Korea

counted over 14,000 victims killed during the revolt, 86% of them by the security forces, and estimated that the total death toll may have been as high as 30,000.

Many people on the island were arrested, and two years later, as they awaited trial, were executed as the Korean War broke out.

This photo shows a group of American Presbyterians visiting a memorial to the victims on Jeju Island.

K & H
on Jeju

In June 1950, North Korean troops invaded South Korea.

Equipped with Russian tanks, they quickly overwhelmed the South Korean defenders, and pushed them back past Seoul, the capital of South Korea.

Soviet tank

The United States rushed to provide assistance to their hard-pressed South Korean allies, sending in American troops stationed in Japan, to try to slow the North Korean advance before the whole Korean peninsula fell into communist hands.

The first American soldiers sent to Korea had been on occupation duty in Japan, and few of them – or their officers -- had any significant experience in combat.

Because the troops were inexperienced and insufficiently trained for combat,

Soldiers
on parade

and because they were short on equipment and ammunition, the Americans were repeatedly defeated by the North Koreans,

but succeeded in *delaying* their advance down the Korean peninsula

until a solid defensive position could be established and equipped.

The war between North and South Korea,

Destruction

with Russia and China supporting the North and the U.S. and its allies supporting the south, naturally resulted in many civilian deaths and widespread destruction of property.

Last year, I visited a place called No Gun Ri,

a couple hours drive south of Seoul, the capital of South Korea.

Site of
incident

During the U.S. Army retreat from the North Korean invasion,

a major battle at the city of Daejon, just a dozen miles north of No Gun Ri, ended in defeat for the Americans.

Retreating south, American soldiers evacuated civilians from small towns in the area.

One group of farmers, men, women and children carrying their belongings on their backs,
were directed to a railroad line, and told to follow it.

refugees

Suddenly, American planes flew in, bombing the railroad and strafing the refugees.

Not knowing what was happening, or why, they took cover in a double tunnel under the railroad.

planes

The American soldiers had received orders, not to allow any Korean refugees to go through their lines,
for fear that North Korean soldiers might be among them, disguised as farmers.

American positions were set up on hills near both ends of the tunnels,

and for five days, the civilians were caught inside, fired on by machine guns and rifles.

They had no idea, why the soldiers were shooting at them.

gun statue

Many of the men escaped at night under cover of darkness,

but by the time the Americans retreated further south,

between two hundred and three hundred civilians had been killed in the tunnels --

85% of them children, the rest mostly women.

After the Korean War ended, assistance was given to civilian families who had suffered losses,

but when survivors of No Gun Ri applied for compensation, they were denied,

told that there was no evidence that anything had happened.

The officials, American and Korean, wanted to erase the memory of that event.

But a few of the survivors, led by a man named Chung Eun-yong,

gathered evidence from newspaper accounts, army records, survivors' stories, and other sources

Book

and continued to petition for recognition of the massacre and compensation for their loss.

Mr. Chung also wrote and published a book, giving the survivors' account of what took place.

Finally, nearly 50 years later, an Associated Press investigative reporter took up the story,

and tracking down veterans who had been on the scene,

heard from them essentially the same story that the Korean survivors had told.

Their Pulitzer Prize-winning report received wide international attention,

and both the Korean government and the U.S. Army conducted investigations.

After the initial investigations, President Bill Clinton issued a statement of

“regret that Korean civilians lost their lives at No Gun Ri in late July, 1950,”

but he gave no apology nor admission that the American troops had done anything wrong.

The Korean government has since funded and built the No Gun Ri Peace Park on the site.

Monument
in the
distance

When a group of us visited there in April, 2014, the park Director, the son of Mr. Chung,
whose two siblings were killed there as infants, and his mother severely wounded,
gave us a personal tour of the Memorial and took us through the tunnels under the railroad.

Mr. Chung

While calling our attention to each of the exhibits in the museum section,
he spoke with us about his Christian faith,
and how it helped him make sense of the suffering and death the museum documented.

“So much suffering, and so many innocent deaths,” he said,

“were necessary, so that this memorial Park could be established

to further God's plan to bring peace to the earth.”

He told us about the traditional concept that Koreans call “han,”

unjust suffering that saps people's strength, drives out hope, and suffocates the soul.

The memorial is an attempt to transform No Gun Ri from “a place of suffering and death,
to a place for overcoming painful scars of the past.

and remembering the importance of peace at home and abroad.”

“This memorial is not about placing *blame*,” Mr. Chung assured us,

as he explained the displays detailing the actions of the soldiers and the refugees.

“It's about telling the truth about what happened,

so that the lasting wounds can finally be healed,

and people can move forward toward an enduring peace.”

Then he took our group outside, to look at the monument,

to walk through the underpass where the refugees had been trapped,

monument

and to see where the bullets had struck the tunnel walls --

tunnels

some of them still embedded in the concrete.

bullet holes

Our group included both Koreans and Americans, young adults and seniors, clergy and lay people,
and we were all powerfully affected by what we saw and heard.

Our attitudes toward the claims that there is a “righteous cause” in any war were challenged,

group

and we came away with a new appreciation of the *suffering* of innocent civilians

photo

caught in the violence of war.

Part of the mission of the No Gun Ri Peace Park is to host gatherings promoting peace.

This year, they're organizing an international conference for scholars in Peace Studies.

I pray that their experience at No Gun Ri will be as powerful as ours was,

and that it will promote the world-wide push for peace.

According to one of the Associated Press writers, who has continued to research the No Gun Ri incident
if this event had been made known to the American people at the time, or shortly afterwards,
changes in military training and discipline might have prevented civilian killings in Vietnam
- and more recently, in Afghanistan and Iraq --

killings that have badly damaged the image of America in the eyes of the world,
and that have contributed to the epidemic of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder,
-- PTSD --

that afflicts so many of our servicemen and women.

And I hope that this second-hand experience of the No Gun Ri Peace Park,
which I am pleased to have shared with you,
will move your hearts also,
to discover what you, too, can do to reduce violence and further the cause of peace,
in your family, in your neighborhood, in our state, and around the world.

Through all of this pain and sadness we get a sense of the 한(han) of the people of Jeju. Han refers to a deep kind of unjust suffering and the scar it leaves on people. Nevertheless, the memorial also honored the bravery and the hope of those who finally came out to tell their story bringing the truth to light. We pray that their courage will give us the strength to struggle for peace and life in the face of death. The Island of Jeju has, since the end of the Truth Commission, been declared an Island of Peace for the future. May it be so.