

From Prison to President of the Republic

In All the Stories of Oppressed Peoples, No Man Is More Romantic Than Syngman Rhee, Princeton Graduate and Actual Head of the Theoretical Republic of Korea, but Now Living in Exile in Hawaii.

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WHEN Margaret Wilson was married in the White House, an invitation, in a White House envelope, took its distant way over the Pacific to the city of Honolulu to Syngman Rhee, a man alien in race and tradition, but a friend of the President and his daughter.

To explain, Syngman Rhee, doctor of philosophy from Princeton, and president of the



He is the father of his country, but he can't go home. Korea's exiled President Syngman Rhee, descendant of 48 kings.

unrealized republic of Korea, takes one back 16 generations, and then leaves unexplained the same kind of factors that made Columbus, Shakespeare and Abraham Lincoln unaccountable in the world in which they lived.

The kingdom of Korea, whose history goes back thousands of years, occupied a peninsula projecting from the side of China toward the heart of Japan. It was called the hermit kingdom because it maintained its isolation a generation after Japan opened its doors to the Western World.

Scarcely 50 years ago it made its first treaties and faced the modern world. Its government had fallen into decay and the dynasty which had ruled for 600 years has now come to end.

This dynasty was founded by Yi Taijo, who established the capital at Seoul. Yi is the Chinese equivalent of "Rhee." The first king of this last dynasty had an elder son, who was the crown prince. Sixteen generations ago this crown prince became the ancestor of the boy Syngman, who was born 54 years ago in the western part of Korea, the sixth generation represented by a single son.

King Yi wanted his second son to succeed him, but this was impossible under the law, so the crown prince knowing his father's wish, feigned insanity so successfully that the succession was transferred. When the King learned what his elder son had done to please him, he loved him more than he did the younger son, so the brother later became even more famous than the young King.

The legends are full of the happy relations that existed between the King and his elder brother. In the 16 generations of Dr. Rhee's family 48 kings ruled Korea. Although the estates had been divided until there was nothing left, the family relationship was symbolized by worship in and care for the ancestral temple.

SYNGMAN was reared in an aristocratic environment. The Yang Ban class, which is the name of the nobility, was not measured by wealth, and could not work. In most cases perhaps it became parasitical and distorted, but under the old system it was the only class privileged to take examinations for governmental positions. The method of examination was like that of the Chinese and was based on the Chinese classics.

According to the Korean custom on his first birthday the boy was placed in front of a table on which were set many articles; it was supposed that the first one that the child took indicated his future career. In Syngman's case a pen was within reach and he took that, causing great joy to his mother because it showed that he would become a great scholar.

He was set to work on the useless task of learning the Chinese classics, and at 6 had learned 1,000 characters. When the time approached for the examinations he recited in one winter 10 whole books, a thing which few others had been able to do. He was in a Confucian school until the Chino-Japanese War in 1894-95, when the old traditional civil examination system was abolished.

It was evident to thinking observers that the Chinese, whom the Koreans were imitating, had lost the war because they had stood against modern ideas, so the progressive element began to get some influence in Korea.

The young man Rhee wanted to retire to the mountains and become a scholar, but his parents were getting old and had no other children, and he wanted to pay back for what they had done for him. He was persuaded to attend a Methodist missionary school with the expectation that he could, after three years, still pass the new examinations and get a government position. He had to keep this from his mother, as such schools were attended only by the lower class, so an aristocrat attending them would lose caste.

AT this time Russia, China and Japan were competing with each other to get control of the Korean government. Russia, by most high-handed methods, had secured great concessions in the north. The Japanese were very fearful of what it might mean to them and redoubled their efforts; the weak Korean government fell in the middle.

At this time Dr. Philip Jaisohn of Philadelphia, a Korean American citizen, was invited over as an adviser of the Korean government. He saw how things were going and founded the independence movement against the intrigues of the foreign embassies. He was soon compelled to leave, but the idea was implanted, and young



Despite a Korean declaration of independence, Admiral Viscount Saito rules Korea for Japan.

Rhee became the leader and has continued in that role ever since.

The young element of the Independence Club came into clash with the government and 17 men were put into prison. Young Rhee was chosen chairman of the privy council and directed a continuous mass meeting which lasted until the 17 men were released.

There was a demonstration of great numbers of people which lasted for weeks. The government tried to frighten Rhee, then offered him a bribe in the form of a position, and at last promised reforms which it did not carry out.

Many were arrested, including Rhee, though no legal charge could be made against the prisoners. Several Americans worked in Rhee's behalf, but to no avail. At last Rhee tried to break from jail, thus providing the government with a legal charge against him.

For seven months, except for two minutes a day, he lay with his feet, hands and neck locked in a heavy wooden stock—in constant fear of being executed. Twice it was reported that his

execution had taken place and both times his father came the following morning to take away his body.

FINALLY, at the whim of one of the judges, the stock was removed and his sentence made life imprisonment. For six years he remained in prison, but during the last four, conditions were made easier.

He started a school in the jail and 40 of his fellow prisoners became Christians and some of them became famous in later years. He wrote a book, which was smuggled out and printed in California and is known as "The Spirit of the Independence Movement."

With the outbreak of the Russian-Japanese War the conservatives and pro-Russian forces collapsed and Rhee was released from prison. Although for a time the Japanese had thought him to be on their side because he was opposed to the Russians, they found immediately that what he wanted was Korea for the Koreans, not for the Japanese, so he was forced to escape from the country as quickly as possible.

He was released in August, and Prince Min tried to get him appointed envoy to Washington, but the Japanese prevented it. He left for America in September, and in the harbor of Honolulu met Mr. Taft, then Secretary of War, who gave him a letter to President Roosevelt, whom Rhee was able to see at the time of the peace conference between Russia and Japan, but since he had only personal and not diplomatic standing it was not possible to accomplish anything.

The next year the young Korean entered George Washington University as a special student and in two and a half years graduated with an A. B. degree. Two years later he got an M. A. degree from Harvard, and the following year a Ph. D. degree from Princeton at the last commencement at which Woodrow Wilson presided.

DURING all his student career, Rhee had supported himself by speaking, mostly in churches. On finishing his studies he had decided to give up political activity and was persuaded by the Y. M. C. A. to go back to Korea to start student religious and educational work.

He would not, however, co-operate with the Japanese, and as they were about to arrest him he managed to leave the country as a delegate to the Methodist quadrennial conference in Minneapolis in 1912, and has never been back.

In 1913 the Koreans in Hawaii invited him to come there. When he arrived he found several thousand Koreans rather adrift in the world and decided that they needed a school. He established one which now has the support of the best Americans on the Islands and has sent many students to colleges on the mainland.

Japan formally annexed Korea in 1910 and ruled it with military ruthlessness. On March 1, 1919, the funeral of the late Korean Emperor was to be celebrated. Instead of the expected ceremonies there was simultaneously staged a revolutionary demonstration involving hundreds of thousands of Koreans who shouted for independence, but attempted no violence.

The leaders of the revolution elected a full government, composed mostly or wholly of men outside the country. Syngman Rhee was in America and was elected President of the republic and continues to bear the responsibility, though it is as president of the Korean national commission that he has really active functions.

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A typical Korean country gentleman. Until modern times his native land was a hermit among nations.