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Pioneers of German-Korean Partnership

by Karl Leuteritz

When the opening of Korea to Western trade, and thereby to Western ideas and influence, began in the early 1880s, Germany followed close on the heels of the U.S.A. and Britain as the third Western country to establish relations with the Royal Government of Korea. Incidentally, it should also be remembered that when the Korea Branch of the RAS was formed in 1900, the original membership was composed of nationals of the three countries just mentioned: Americans, Britishers and Germans.

More important, however, is the fact that some of the early Germans in Korea must have been very interesting personalities,and that they succeeded in establishing a partnership both material and spiritual which has survived the vicissitudes which befell both countries in the decades between then and now. Indeed, one of them—Moellendorff—wielded such unique influence, even though only for a comparatively brief period of time, that he can safely be described as the kingpin of Korea’s early modernization efforts.

But let us begin at the beginning:

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The first encounter Korea had with the Germans—or with a German, to be more precise—was far from encouraging. True, there were no naval or military engagements like those with the French or the Americans, but the so-called grave-robbing-incident of 1867 was in itself so crude and grotesque as to be almost incredible. In that year, a German merchant from Hamburg, Ernst Oppert, was staying in Shanghai. There he met a disgruntled French priest who had escaped from Korea where the Taewon’-gun,regent for his son King Kojong who was still a minor, was actively persecuting the Catholic Church. Together with an enterprising American, they hatched the plan to sail to Korea, open the tomb of the Namyon’- gun (the Taewon’gun’s father) conveniently located near the west coast, take the coffin into their custody, and return it only against trade concessions!  [page 2]

They actually chartered and fitted out a vessel, and set sail under the flag of the North German Federation just founded by Bismarck. They landed on the Korean coast and marched to the tomb in the Kaya hills west of Seoul. Fortunately, the coal shovels which were their strongest tools were no match for the sturdy construction of a Yi dynasty tomb. The raiders thus left the scene and returned to their ship. But,undeterred by this failure, Oppert still had the nerve to write a letter to the Taewon’- gun describing his action,and demanding the opening of Korea for Western trade.

The answer—certainly not from the Taewon’gun himself—simply stated that Korea had no need for looting foreigners. Thus, the only result of the whole ill-devised scheme was to reinforce and to prolong the Taewon’gun’s anti-foreign policy.

Oppert later described his Korean adventure in a book—long out of print—entitled “Ein verschlossenes Land.” There was even an English translation called “A Forbidden Country.”

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The next act, 15 years later, took place in an entirely different setting. In 1876,the “Hermit Kingdom” had concluded its first foreign treaty with Japan, but in 1882,things really began to move. The U.S. was the first to obtain shipping and trade concessions by the “Shufeldt Convention” of May 22nd, Britain followed suit on June 6th, and Germany on June 30th. Foreigners not being permitted to enter Seoul at that time,all these treaties were concluded in a tent on the beach of Inchon, then called Chemulp’o.

Not only did the treaties have this setting in common, the texts were also identical, due to the insistence of the Chinese emissary Ma Chieng Chung who was “advising” the Korean negotiators in exercise of the suzerain powers of the Imperial Court in Peking. But while the “Shufeldt Convention” was duly ratified, its British and German copies never were. In both countries, resistance by trading circles to the high import duties—10% for essentials,30°/o for luxury goods—conceded to Korea by the U.S., itself a highly protectionist country at that time, made renegotiation necessary.

When tnis got under way in October/November 1883, the scene had again changed. The German and British negotiators—interestingly enough [page 3] acting together as a joint team—were officially received and lodged in Seoul, and facing them across the conference table together with the Korean negotiators Kim Hong Jip and Yi Cho Yon, was another German: Paul Georg von Moellendorff, Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs of Korea! The sources do not indicate how this fact influenced the course of negotiations. Anyway, the treaties were signed and sealed on November 24,1883, setting the minimum and maximum import duties at 5% and 20%, respectively. In the course of 1884, the treaties were ratified, and diplomatic relations established.

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But diplomatic history apart, who was Paul Georg von Moellehdorff, and how did he come to occupy such a remarkable position, hardly distinguishable from his Korean colleagues in his oriental robes of office?

Born at Zedenik, Brandenburg—thus in the Prussian heartland—in 1847, he studied Law and Oriental Languages (mainly Chinese) at the University of Halle. Having completed his studies, he joined the Chinese Maritime Customs Administration in 1869. Finding the chances for promotion slim, he quit in 1874 and joined the German Foreign Service as a Chinese interpreter, first at the German Consulate in Canton, then at the German Legation in Peking. In 1879 he was appointed Vice Consul in Tientsin, but when the promotion to full Consul which he had hoped for failed to materialize, he quit again in spring 1882. This time, he entered the services of Chinese Viceroy Li Hung Chang in Tientsin as a Foreign Language Secretary.

In autumn 1882, Li Hung Chang in turn recommended Moellendorff to the Korean Government as an expert for negotiations with foreign powers, and for administrative reform. In his letter of recommendation, he described his nominee as “a good natured and sincere man,” an expert in diplomatic affairs, and fluent in foreign languages. But at the same time, he privately remarked to a friend: “The Japanese stand in great awe of the Germans and dread von Moellendorff,” thereby revealing the political motives behind his recommendation. We can also surmise that Moellendorff must already have built up quite a reputation by that time!

Moellendorff’s involvement in Korean affairs lasted only till October 1885, after which he returned to China, rejoining the Maritime Customs Administration, was awarded the advancement which had eluded him earlier, and finally died in 1901 as Customs Commissioner in Ningpo. [page 4] Moellendorff thus spent 28 years in China and only three in Korea. But his claim to historical fame rests fairly and squarely with his accomplishments during those three brief years to which we shall now turn our attention.

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On November 18, 1882, Moellendorff signed his contract of employment with the Korean Government and on December 12th of the same year he proudly rode into Seoul amid crowds of spectators gaping at the first Westerner permitted, and indeed invited, to enter the capital. He was assigned to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and within days was appointed its Vice Minister. Immediately he set to work with great imagination and energy, though not always with consistency: a contemporary once complained that under his direction, everything was being done by fits and starts!

Moellendorff, referred to in the Korean records as either “Mok In-dok” or “Mok Ch’amp’an, held the post of Vice Foreign Minister during practically his entire stay in Korea, and it certainly was his most spectacular and highest-ranking one. But more important in the long run, and certainly more significant than the other Vice Ministerships which he concurrently held for brief periods—at the Ministry of Construction from April to June 1884,and at the Ministry of Defence from December 1884 to February 1885—was his work in establishing and directing the Maritime Customs Administration from 1883 to 1885, and the Royal Mint from 1884 to 1885. In these two capacities, he was able to introduce a modern system of administration and modern technology. Indeed, he gave the decisive impulses for opening up the economic potential of the country.

Whatever his personal shortcomings may have been, the results of his activities were stupendous. In order to get the Customs Administration and the Mint going, he recruited European administrative and technical experts which a very modern clause in his contract authorized him to do “for as long as they need to transfer their skills to their Korean counterparts.” These were later joined by a geologist, an agricultural expert, and even a sericulturist! Most of these experts came from Germany, to the chagrin of other Western observers. Thus, when some of these experts—due to the slow communications and transport facilities of the time—arrived in Korea only after Moellendorff’s departure, they ran into considerable difficulties. [page 5]

For the Mint, Moellendorff naturally imported a minting press. He also designed an entire set of 14 coins though he did not stay long enough to see them produced. Furthermore, he imported and installed the first steam-driven power generator. Finally, in an entirely different field, he took the initiative for establishing the Government Language School (Tongmunhak) in 1883. There, English was taught, while other Western languages were added later.

But when, clearly overstepping his instructions to seek a balance between the Chinese and the Japanese influence in Korea, Moellendorff secretly recruited Russian officers to train the Korean army, he had to leave the country rather hurriedly in October 1885.

Was the American contemporary right who is said to have observed “The conduct of this man would seem to be without parallel in history”? Perhaps we should listen instead to the rather wistful comment by the German travelogue author Ernst von Hesse-Wartegg who wrote a decade later: “The many innovations to be found in Korea, hitherto so distrustful of Europe, are due to his initiative... Had Moellendorff been kept in his responsible position, the administrative and commercial conditions of the country would long since have taken a turn for the better, and the lion’s share of government posts and foreign trade would have been given to the Germans” (sic!).

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Hesse-Wartegg had visited Korea in 1894, immediately before the outbreak of the Chino-Japanese War. In his account, he provides us with an interesting glimpse of how the Germans, and Westerners in general, in Korea lived at that time. According to him, there were 83 Westerners in the country, as compared to 2,204 Chinese and 9,204 Japanese. The figure 83 includes 14 members of diplomatic and consular missions, but not the 35 or so missionaries! These, our source maintains, were not very popular with their worldly contemporaries. Among the 83, the 19 Germans were second only to the 24 Britishers, being followed by 13 Americans, seven Russians, four Frenchmen, three Danes, two Italians, and one Portuguese.

There was even a club in Seoul to cater to their social needs. It had 19 members, and Hesse-Wartegg vividly contrasts its shabby clay building, one of its two rooms completely filled by a billiard table and a [page 6] bar, with its pompous title: Cercle diplomatique et litteraire! Under these circumstances, most entertaining was done at home, the German Consul Krien being the most popular host, closely followed by the British Customs Director Sir John McLeavy-Brown, and the American advisor Greathouse. Consul Krien’s residence was hardly superior to the club, but it boasted a piano and a tennis court!

At that time, facilities in Chemulp’o (now Inchon) seem to have been somewhat superior to those in Seoul, and indeed, most Western businessmen worked and resided there. Indeed, according to Hesse-Wartegg, the mansion-like building of the Hamburg trading firm of H.C. Meyer & Co. was the first landmark to be seen from any approaching ship. This firm played quite an important role in the opening of Korea, holding also lumbering concessions, and operating a gold mine at Tongogae (somewhere in Kangwondo), which, however, was not very profitable. They even held a concession to construct and operate a railway line from Seoul to Wonsan, but the realization of this scheme was prevented by political developments.

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In the years immediately following Hesse-Wartegg’s visit—and the Chino-Japanese War—two more interesting protagonists entered the scene.

The Korean Government had finally decided that it needed a German language instructor, and Consul Dr. Weipert who had in the meantime succeeded Mr. Krien managed to secure the services of a certain J. Bolljahn who had worked in Tokyo in a similar capacity for eight years. The “J.” is intriguing, but it is all the sources ever mention. I have not been able to ascertain his full name. Anyway, Mr. Bolljahn was employed as of January 1, 1898,and he seems to have worked very successfully. Already four years later, in March 1902, Consul Dr. Weipert could recommend one of his graduate students to the Foreign Ministry for employment as an interpreter for German, along with those already employed for English, French, Russian, Japanese and Chinese. Beyond that, I have to admit, the sources become rather bleak: The consular records contain only repeated vigorous claims on Mr. Bolljahn’s behalf for a salary equal to that of his English and French colleagues. As the Johnny-come-lately among the foreign language instructors, he was obviously fighting an uphill battle! [page 7]

At about the same time, we find the former Prussian military bandmaster Franz Eckert in Seoul as ‘‘Court Composer and Military Music Master,” and it is through him that Koreans were first introduced to Western music. Judging by the results, his impact must have been enormous. In 1902, he was commissioned to compose a new national anthem, and for his successful efforts, he was awarded the “Taeguk Order, 3rd Class” in 1903. The music is said still to be preserved in the National Archives, and from there also came the surprising information that prior to Eckert’s anthem, the tune of “Auld lang syne” had been used for official occasions. Also in his case, the consular records contain a claim for a salary increase, though for somewhat different reasons: it seems that Eckert had been hired to instruct one military band, but was actually expected to instruct two! Thus, ran the argument, this double workload should be honored by doubling the salary originally agreed upon. Eckert certainly could use some extra money, for as we know from another source, he was not only one of the few married men among Westerners in Korea, but also had some extremely marriageable daughters who seem to have created quite a stir in the community.

VII

This information is contained in the papers of Dr. Richand Wunsch, a German medical doctor who spent the years from 1901 to 1905 in Korea. Although the author died in 1911, these letters and diaries have only been published in 1976, and they are a veritable goldmine. According to Dr. Wunsch, seven Germans were residing in Seoul at that time. It soon becomes apparent that he counts only the heads of households, but is most of them were bachelors, the entire number cannot have been very much larger. The author also notes rather disapprovingly that most Western bachelors did in fact enjoy female companionship in their homes, and the interesting thing is that they invariably chose Japanese ladies as their companions. Korean female beauty seems to have eluded them.

VIII

Topping Dr. Wunsch’s list of seven naturally were the German consul (Dr. Weipert) and his secretary, charged, besides their normal consular duties, with the delicate task of maintaining diplomatic relations [page 8] between the two countries. Here we have to remember that during all those years of turbulent power politics the Korean Government was desperately trying to save the country from being swallowed up by one or the other of the contenders for regional hegemony: Japan and China before 1895, Japan and Russia later, Japan being backed by Britain, Russia by France. The ‘‘German connection” was one of the tools employed to this end.

A very early indication of this had occurred already in 1885 when the Korean Foreign Ministry addressed a semi-official request to the German Consul for his advice on how to react to the occupation of the so-called Hamilton Islands (Komundo) off the Korean south coast by a British naval detachment. This put the Consul, himself a former naval Captain named Zembsch, into a rather awkward position. He could not condone the action without losing the concurrence of the government to which he was accredited; he could not condemn it without offending the rival yet friendly power with whom Germany had just jointly negotiated her treaty with Korea! He extricated himself nicely. It would not be practical, he wrote, to reduce the information received to the format of a cablegram. Therefore, he requested written instructions from his government (which, as everybody knew, would be months in coming). He did, however, add as his personal opinion that it would be wise for the Koreans to lodge a protest in order not to appear to acquiesce in the use of force.

Shortly before Dr. Wunsch arrived in Korea, the official visit of Prince Henry (Heinrich), the Kaiser’s younger brother, had seemed to offer another opportunity. William F. Sands in his Undiplomatic Memories has left a rather unflattering account of how this aborted, due mainly to psychological misjudgments by the visitor, and he wryly comments: “Nobody could foresee a time when diplomacy unbacked by a rather contemptuous gesture of force would be worth trying.”

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The next two entries have already been mentioned, teacher Bolljahn and bandmaster Eckert, and we should rather skip No. 5, a businessman named Carl Wolter who seems to have indulged in rather shady real estate transactions—incidentally, there still is a file in the consular section of the German Embassy concerning one of the plots of land involved! This brings us to Dr. Wunsch himself.

Recommended by Prof. Dr. Erwin Baelz in Tokyo, personal physician to the Meiji-Tenno, he came to Korea as ‘‘Court Physician,” [page 9] and we can imagine his dismay when upon arrival in Seoul he found another Court Physician already in residence: the British lady doctor Miss Cook! This resulted in some rather unpleasant rivalry which in spite of repeated displays of royal favor was never resolved.

Anyway, Dr. Wunsch’s official duties consisted of being present in the Royal Palace for one hour each day, during which time he was consulted on all kinds of problems, though very rarely medical ones. He has given us a very amusing description of how King Kojong’s pulse was measured one day. This was not so simple as we might imagine, as only the palace eunuchs were permitted to touch the king’s body, and they were either too stupid or could not be trusted to take his pulse. So a string was attached to each of the king’s wrists, and the two loose ends were handed to two doctors for feeling and counting his pulse.

Being an able doctor, Dr. Wunsch quickly built up a prosperous practice among the foreign community in Seoul, and also established a clinic where he treated poorer Koreans free of charge. In this connection, he deplored not only the appalling public health conditions in Seoul, but also the “low professional standard” of many missionary doctors, and was annoyed that ‘‘their activities have led Koreans to believe they are doing the doctor a favor by consulting him, expecting some medicine as a gift in return.” Dr. Wunsch also travelled extensively, mostly on horse-back, and went on hikes in the North Fortress area which are still popular today. Once he took the train on the newly-opened railway line to Pusan. The trip took two days, the travellers being required to spend the night in Taegu. On a very human level, he fell deeply in love with one of the Eckert daughters, Amalie. But after much agonizing, he decided not to marry her, because “she will never become a lady!” This leaves us guessing what Dr. Wunsch’s requirements for “being a lady” were, and in which respect he found poor Miss Eckert lacking.

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This leaves one more person to account for—perhaps the most remarkable one of them all: Miss Antoinette Sontag, an unmarried lady in her early 60s who occupied an undefined but quite influential position in the Royal Palace. She had been staying with the Russian Minister C. von Waeber, a distant relative of hers, when King Kojong found refuge in the Russian Legation after the murder of Queen Min. Miss Sontag cared [page 10] for the King and obviously so impressed him with her talent for getting things done that he asked her to accompany him when he was able to return to the Palace. This she did, and soon had established herself as a kind of MC.

She arranged audiences for Western visitors, and organized receptions and dinners for foreign dignitaries. The dinners were French style—with one important modification: seated at the table between the guests were kisaeng girls—Dr. Wunsch refers to them as “members of the Royal Corps de Ballet” and notes with obvious surprise: “The Koreans seem to enjoy this.’’ Miss Sontag also advised the royal family concerning the purchase of Western furniture and fittings for the palace, and while her taste may be questioned, her influence may not! It becomes apparent from Dr. Wunsch’s remarks that with her assistance many things became possible at Court for the Western applicant who without her would have gotten nowhere at all.

Besides her Court activities, Miss Sontag also ran a boarding-house (“pension”) for single foreigners where mid-day and evening meals were served also to persons not residing there. Dr. Wunsch profited from this opportunity quite frequently. For the same clientele, she also organized picnics and excursions. There still exists a photo showing Miss Sontag in a sedan-chair being carried along a trail by two young men in bowler hats!

An enterprising lady indeed. So it is all the more surprising that—while there are still Western residents in Seoul who can remember hearing their parents talk about the “Sontag Hotel”—historians had by and large ignored her very existence until Dr. Wunsch’s diaries came to light. Entries in the Korean Court records mentioning “Sohn Taek” had been taken to refer to some obscure Korean courtier.

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When, after the Russo-Japanese War, the Treaty of Portsmouth formally recognized Korea as belonging to the Japanese sphere of interest, all these advisors and experts had to leave Korea. Most of them returned to Germany, Dr. Wunsch went on to Tokyo and finally Tsingtau; Miss Sontag retired to the French Riviera. Everything seemed finished. Everything, as we now know, was yet to begin.

The partnership for which these pioneers laid the foundation and the respect they earned are perhaps best expressed by a Korean phrase used to characterize a particularly efficient person: He functions like a German [page 11] machine. This expression, I like to think, could go back to the time of Moellendorff, who imported the first of those machines.

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