*In Korea (Chosen)*

*(V Koreji /Čosen)*

J. V. Daneš (1926)

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*Sea phosphorescence. Fusan. The Koreans. Country along the railway track. Keijo. The Japanese policy in Korea.*

We spent a marvellous night aboard a very comfortable ship sailing as fast as do the speedy ocean postal steamers, more or less eighteen nautical miles per hour. The view of the coast on both sides of the strait dividing the islands of Hondo and Kyushu is most attractive. As the ship quickly moved away the details faded and all that remained were large, twinkling clouds lit by the intense, rotating light of lighthouses. We were on board for a long time, remembering the fatal battle of Tsushima that took place hereabouts on 27th March 1905. It decimated the Russian fleet of Admiral Rozhestvensky who, after having circumnavigated Africa and tropical Asia, was trying to help the remaining Russian South Asian squadron.

Going to our cabin we soon fell asleep. After a while I was awoken by my wife who was disturbed by a strange, bright light filling the cabin coming through our window. I looked out and saw a rare, marvellous spectacle. It looked as if the water surface was burning with petrol or spirit flames. The edges of the ripples caused by the ship were glittering with an intense golden brilliance that was glimmering and jumping on the crests of the waves that were radiating out from the ship until they sank back into the pale blue glow of the ocean which extended to the horizon.

We went up to on deck to watch this unusual glow that, for its intensity and scale, outshone any sea radiation we had seen previously. We were sailing on a vast glowing sea; a phenomenon probably caused by a huge number of tiny organisms, although we saw near to the ship many small lumpy pieces of a greenish coloured substance that glowed like tiny light bulbs.

Early next morning we landed at Fusan, Korea. This is the starting point of the railway connection via Seoul (Keijo) to Mukden. From there it extends as the Chinese Eastern Railway to Peking and Harbin and connects from there to the Trans-Siberian Railway.

Fusan is located in a bay, set amidst high, steep hills—bare rock and scree covered in trees. The Japanese quarter spreads out adjacent to the harbour while the Korean one lies apart at the base of the hill of Ryutosan, from the top of which there is a beautiful view of the bay, the city and the surrounding mountains. We passed quickly through the Japanese town, went to enjoy the view from the hilltop and then rushed back to the Korean quarter and its market. We were eager to learn about the citizens of this nation whose history has been so unhappy and distressful in the last few decades.

Our first impressions of the Koreans were positive. The walk itself along the cobbled, dusty streets between narrow, adobe-built dwellings was not attractive, but it was the people, the men and the women, who surprised us most. From what we had read we expected a dirty, unsightly folk whose faces bespoke of bad character, national depravity which was the moral cause of their sad political decadence. Instead, we met well-built men dressed in clean, long white clothes who evidently took considerable pride in their appearance.

The bony, oblong faces of the men were decorated with a thin, stiff, well-kept moustache. On their heads was a knot of hair on which they placed a strange, lacelike small hat made from black horsehair. Its only purpose can be to protect and decorate their hair-do.

Most of the elderly Koreans seemed ridiculous to the eyes of Europeans. Their serious, dry faces, often decorated with big glasses, brushy beards and toy-like reticular hats, look funny. A very long pipe with a tiny bowl in no way increases their attractiveness. On the other hand, their well-built bodies, determination and carefree outlook had a positive effect on us. Many people feel sorry for the Korean women, suggesting that they are treated like pack animals, but we did not get the impression of a downtrodden, oppressed poor waster. In the market especially they are full of energy, able to handle cartloads of merchandise and make good use of their expressive vocal organs, reminding us of markets everywhere.

I dare say that we felt very comfortable walking amongst the Koreans. They are an honest, well-built people who, despite their mistakes and shortcomings, have many good and positive features. It was a relief to get out from the enchanted world, though beautiful, to watch a people who are not puppets of their customs, as are the Japanese.

With pleasure we shall always remember the beauties of Japan; admiring and respecting the wonders that have been created by the traditional Japanese sense of beauty, their ability to harmonise their creations with nature, so creating artistically exquisite and by far more enchanting settings. However, here in Korea we felt more human, freer as we met with these citizens of a different nation whose nature is so contrary to the aesthetic, industrious qualities of the Japanese.

Not only in its people but also in its landscape is Korea in marked contrast to Japan. In Japan every inch of land is used. Nothing is left unworked, the slopes are conscientiously forested and in the valleys and plains there are terraced fields, one set upon the next. Everywhere there are shades of green. Here in Korea the hillsides have been woodless for ages, the valleys are empty, mostly given over to rough-and-tumble mountain brooks carrying masses of scree from the bare hills. There are no villages encircled in green, instead aggregates of grey, low buildings with small yards surrounded by clay fences.

I get the sense of being somewhere in Albania or in the underdeveloped parts of the Italian Apennine Mountains. Between the settlements along simple packhorse paths, only a few of which have been changed into passable roads, travelled small caravans of tiny horses burdened with massive packs. Elsewhere there were women carrying heavy loads on their backs trailing uphill and down dale on rocky tracks. The roads carried little traffic and the only relief from the vast, empty brown-grey picture were occasional white figures, sitting or walking. By the streams on nearby boulders women eagerly washed and dried white clothes.

We had no occasion to find out whether the reputed lack of personal cleanliness was really as terrible as has been described, but their clean white clothing shows an appreciable personal care for appearance. Also the filigree caps worn by the male population need regular care.

The Japanese have done much to raise the level of agriculture in Korea and their efforts are obvious, especially in regions where through irrigation they have made effective use of large areas of fertile soil. Also in the mountainous areas their care is evident in forestation. In this the Japanese have done much and I know nowhere else in the whole world where forestation is as intensive as in Korea. On previously bare slopes alongside the entire rail track from Fusan to Seoul now grow conscientiously planted coniferous stands. Entire slopes right up to the crests many hundreds of meters above the valley floor have been planted as far as the eye can see. Some are already substantial groves, others still consist of very small trees. It is an immense and costly exercise which is not fully appreciated by the Koreans—the forests being for them, as with most people living in desolate regions, simply a source of fuel that they plunder ruthlessly.

Even if the Japanese do nothing else for Korea, their forestation of the bare hills to that extent they have done should be a blessing for the future in this otherwise fruitful and rich country.

Southern Korea has always had closer contacts with Japan. It was here in the late Ancient Era and in the Middle Ages that there existed flourishing empires with their own strong cultural identity, so different in many ways from their basic Chinese foundation. Their contacts with Japan have been intensive and it was through here that ancient Chinese Buddhist elements reached the Imperial Island.

Korea fell under Chinese control during the Mongolian Dynasty, assisting the famous Kublai Khan in his sea expeditions against Japan. These came to grief as similarly happened to the so-called Spanish Armada of Philip II, once sent to conquer Britain.

At the end of the 14th Century Seoul became the capital of a new empire, whose dynasty ruled until the monarchy was recently abolished. Since that early time a major feature of Korea’s history has been a strict isolation from all foreign influences accompanied by a gradual decline of its unique culture. The aggressive campaigns of the Grand Japanese Shogun, Hideyoshi, devastated a major part of the peninsula, causing huge losses to the Korean Empire. However, despite the superior force of the Japanese armies they were not strong enough to take permanent possession of the entire country.

Korea was able to maintain its isolation against foreign influences until the late 19th Century. Christian missionaries and other intruders were cruelly put to death and punitive campaigns seeking vengeance on the Korean government were blocked by force and bombardment—the sad result of their poisonous policy towards foreigners.

In an effort to oppose the growing pressures of the superpowers to open its ports to international business, as had happened in China and Japan, Korea made approaches to Japan as China, which had long claimed control over the peninsula, showed its ineffectiveness. The opening of contacts with Japan did not strengthen its position. Korea was forced to acquiesce, making agreements with the superpowers and allowing missionaries to enter the country. It also found itself yielding more and more to its expansive and better-organised neighbour, who saw Korea as an excellent addition to its domain. Japan made successful use of the disintegration and demoralization at the Seoul royal court, rotten by intrigues and unable to oppose unscrupulous Japanese violence.

The trip up through Korea was interesting. The day was bright and sunny, hot by midday. The air was dry and breathing was easier than in Japan during its cool rainy season.

We arrived in Seoul late in the evening, taking up residence in a well-appointed hotel fitted with many comfortable facilities. It had been built in the capital by the head office of the Korean Railways; a company belonging to the South Manchuria Railway Company. Next day while we were enjoying our breakfast we met a compatriot, Mr Studený, who as a musician plays every evening in a quartet at our hotel. He has lived for many years in the Far East and enjoys his present job.

In his company we made a morning tour to the public Nanzan Park[[1]](#footnote-1) that covers the steep slopes of Nanzan[[2]](#footnote-2) Hill. Step by step a gorgeous panorama of Seoul opened before us. It must be the most beautifully located inland city that we have seen.

The downtown is located on flatland and there is no river there. However the vast palace gardens surrounding buildings of picturesque shapes break the grey monotony of the streets and houses. Old walls with huge gates climb up the surrounding foothills almost enclosing massive hills whose barren, rocky cliffs tower high above—desolate slopes glittering white in the sunshine. These are dangerous, deserted mountains that provide refuge for wild beasts, even now. It is said that there are big pale tigers which, during harsh winters, leap over the fences, force their way through the dilapidated roof of a Korean dwelling to carry off their prey.

Seoul (Keijo-fu) has more than a quarter of a million inhabitants and covers a large area. It has a healthy climate. Winters are cold and dry and summers are hot, but it is all quite bearable and Europeans enjoy coming here to recover from the unbearable, sweltering heat of the ports of China and Japan.

Traffic in the streets of Seoul is vibrant. Except in the neighbourhood of government buildings one sees few Japanese people. There are many more Chinese but typical Koreans predominate, filling the local electric trams which look strangely out of place in a setting which otherwise recalls the Middle Ages. We often met richly decorated palanquins; numerous ancient-looking carriages with frightful grating wheels leaving the markets; and many earnest gentlemen wearing glasses and walking determinedly—considering their energy and self-confidence one fears their very determination to rid themselves of foreign rule.

The narrow Korean strait seemed to us a bigger cultural divide than the thousands of kilometres of the Asian interior. Were it not for the typical Korean dress, Seoul’s streets and its market scenes would, for instance, resemble any other in Russian Central Asia. It is so different from the Japanese ones.

A shortage of draught cattle and packhorses on the islands is only one factor accounting for this big difference. Rather it is the result of fundamentally different ways of living that have emerged over the ages. In contrast to the charming, aesthetically elaborate and precise ways of the Japanese, here in Korea one can feel the very expansion of the deserts. They savour neither the beauty of nature nor appreciate the green forests where these are not protected by the authority of the state or the magic power of their gods and priests. Their monasteries, sanctuaries and palaces are the only oases in a country so unscrupulously deprived of its greenery.

The royal palaces are still in the possession of the former king, now Prince Li, who is said to have reconciled with having been relieved of his royal power and is now living on his rich pension and revenue from his estates that are being developed by the Japanese. Many other Korean aristocrats are probably also happy with the present state of things since the Japanese have bought their sympathy with titles and sinecures; they love the safety of their lives and properties so are unwilling to risk anything for political dreams and plots.

In Seoul there are two major groups of palaces, one in the northwest and the other in the northeast of the city. The former is still the residence of the prince and his family, and all one can see is the outer part containing the so-called audience hall. This is a massive Chinese-style roof resting on huge granite pillars and columns, on all sides surrounded by broad moats full of water in which, alas, now rots a mass of dense vegetation. A pleasant pond extends from the back of this hall up into a park—a dendrologist’s paradise with greens of many shades contrasting with a background of dark and solid outlines of coniferous trees.

The eastern palace together with its surrounding park is dedicated to education. The main palace buildings have been turned into museums containing a rich treasure trove of royal collections. Linking these are beautifully decorated outbuildings recalling the former splendour of the royal courts.

The style of these weatherworn outbuildings reminds one of Japanese palaces combined with Chinese fashion, yet they look more massive and heavy. Their marble staircases, creating terraces of different heights, connect the palaces and give the whole complex a unique, cheerful impression.

Eagerly we browsed through remnants of the various periods in the development of Korean art and were surprised by how much they closely resembled Chinese artefacts. We had not expected to find such similarities in the arts of these two countries, nor had we known that that of Japan depends so heavily upon Korean and Chinese standards.

We were later to reflect on what we saw. An undeniable testament to the power of the Japanese spirit has been their ability to combine the borrowed models of China and Korea with their love for nature and intimate sense of stylized beauty and haleness of the countryside of their homeland. While in Japan this sense of the complex beauty of living nature and an appreciation of fine artistic creations exists even within the masses, in China and Korea this remains the right of the privileged classes—rulers, their hangers-on and the clergy. The attitude of the commoners, especially towards nature, is absolutely barbarian, brutally devastating.

One part of the gardens adjacent to the palaces has been turned into a botanical park and redeveloped in accordance to Japanese rules of garden design; another includes a fairly nice zoological garden.

We were most disappointed by the famous marble pagoda, which is imposing neither aesthetically nor in its size. Another attraction often shown to foreigners is a huge bronze bell whose low, resounding peal is audible all around the city. They say it was made in the 14th Century and as a sacrifice a child was thrown into the glowing, liquid metal.

We visited the queens’ tomb that lies behind the eastern gate of the city. It is surrounded by many roughly cut statues and reliefs made in Chinese style as well as a number of temples. They do not represent anything of artistic value and probably reflect a time of serious decadence in the arts of Korea.

The government buildings erected by the Japanese are concentrated in the western part of the city next to the railway station. They create a modern quarter consisting of huge European-style buildings only slightly adapted to the fashion of Far East architecture.

As for transportation, health services and law and order, the Japanese authorities have done a lot for Korea. Previously they had almost no railways and roads; the country and its people were sunk in disorder and dirt, and at the mercy of all kinds of brigands. The corruption of the Korean court and its authorities was well known; organised gangs of bandits were playing havoc in all parts of the country, sharing out the poor and defenceless peoples’ earnings with thieves in the ranks of officialdom.

There is no doubt that the previous Korean kingdom was an ineffective anachronism and that any successful order that has come about is of benefit to the majority of its sorely tried citizens. It is a question as to who is to blame for this situation. Is the national character of the Koreans all bad? Nations under despotic and exploitative regimes are usually unable to advance their better and more industrious qualities, so it is wrong for critical foreigners to misjudge the Koreans to be worse than they really are.

Before we travelled through Korea, we had read with dismay articles describing the Koreans as people with absolutely no honour, malformed, weak, full of bad habits and serious criminal intensions who fully deserved to be deprived of their independence to Japanese regimentation; that the strict Japanese order was a genuine benefaction for them.

These statements seemed familiar to us—from another part of the world, from our own experiences under a foreign yoke in the not so distant past. The Germans and their international friends spread similar sentiments about the Slavic nations. Western Europe believed them and, except for a small number of individuals, nobody seriously questioned such defamations. If there had not happened the conflict between Germany and Western Europe, because of problems which were much more important for them than us, nobody in the world of politics would have raised moral objections to the Germans’ historical re-educating of the Slavs to become ideal citizens in accordance to their own model.

We suspect by instinct that such writings disparaging the Koreans for foul habits, both personal and political, serve the cause and continuing supremacy of the foreign nation that controls them, possibly only unconsciously. There may be many positive practical aspects, but from a moral point of view it is incorrect. It sanctions its own egoistic interests, hiding them behind the so-called re-education of the Korean nation to a better way of life.

I cannot elaborate more extensively on the benefits that the Japanese administration has brought to Korea or on the complaints of its opponents. To some extent the Korean problem has many similarities with the former Austro-Hungarian occupation of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

It is beyond doubt that the Japanese have brought order to this country, hurt for a long time by chaos and brutality. Instead of anarchy and exploitation there now appears safety for the people and their property. The Japanese administration is perhaps excessively large and its citizens occupy too many positions to which the Koreans are entitled. But Japanese clerks are honest and diligent. As for public works, much has been achieved. The ports have been reconstructed to suit modern requirements; they have built a large part of the national railway network which is being well maintained; agricultural production, fisheries and mining have all improved. The organization of the healthcare service is more progressive, while their efforts in education have shown remarkable results, although still only a minority of children attend schools.

Taking into consideration that Korea is a country 50 percent smaller than our own Republic[[3]](#footnote-3) with just 17 million inhabitants, we must acknowledge that Japan has taken on a big burden and has done much in investing its own finances to cover the expenditures which Korea would not have achieved through its own budget. Japanese banks and private investors have invested big money in Korea and have done much to open up new resources to the betterment of the Korean people.

The Japanese community numbers less than 400,000 men. It is concentrated mainly in the cities, working as officials in both state and private enterprises. There are also many independent entrepreneurs, businessmen and craftsmen.

Supporters of the Japanese regime argue that progress in Korea would be even greater were it not thwarted by intentional misunderstandings and frequent civil disturbances. The latter were especially common before 1919. In that year the existing government structures, largely military, were changed into a civil administration with a policy of giving the Koreans a larger role. They were trying to appease the fully justified reasons for the Korean citizens’ frustration.

There is not, and perhaps never has been, friendly relations. The Japanese look down on the Koreans with an aloofness occasioned by their assumptions of Korean personal dirtiness, economic backwardness, and political and military inability. The Koreans feel adverse towards the Japanese because of their terrible Shogun expeditions at the end of the 16th Century and despise them because of their small, weak bodies and the lack of an authentic Japanese culture.

The way that the Japanese have crushed the weak Korean state has brought them no sympathy. They did not respect even the most basic form of legal procedure and during the military occupation the Japanese acted with Koreans with extreme brutality. In addition, the Koreans complain that the Japanese have precedence in every single thing. All profit and development of the Korean economy goes first to the Japanese, they say, while Korean enterprises lack the necessary political patronage of the administration. On the contrary, the Japanese blame the Koreans, saying that they are unable to administer larger entrepreneurial activities and only a few are capable of holding responsible jobs in the administration or private enterprise. The Japanese say that the Koreans are irresponsible, disorganised and that they are easily corrupted.

Japanese statesmen solemnly declare that the reforms achieved in the last few years are designed to educate the Koreans to be more responsible in self-government, which is to be wider, and that the Koreans will get more rights as soon as circumstances allow.

There is little doubt that the Korean problem is one of the most interesting in modern history. The attitude of the European powers towards the subjugation of the Korean nation has been the same as that towards the atrocities committed against the Slavs. None of them spoke out against Japan, even when it used the most brutal means to enslave this thousand-year-old country; even Russia, which until the Russo-Japanese War had a hankering for Korea, was unable to protect the oppressed. The public policy displayed by these powers has always been trivial, their concern for economic and business interests taking precedence over principles of justice and humanity.

In Korea one sees an edifying illustration as to the problems of the self-determination of nations. Before our eyes a populous nation lost its independence. In the name of achieving order and progress and under the silent acceptance of the so-called civilised nations, Korea was given a foreign rule—an administration that is doing its utmost to turn Korea into a colony tightly bound to the island Empire. It is without a doubt that this has brought the Koreans convenience and taught them guiding principles, sometimes learned indirectly and as a result of very violent means, that will enable them in the future to protect themselves against oppression, denationalization and most importantly to take charge of the administration of their own matters.

The Japanese declare they have never intended to denationalize the Koreans and that they have always tried to make them their useful allies and friends. Whether they are able to achieve this through implementing reforms to the civil government remains to be seen.

1. Namsan Park [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Namsan [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The Czechoslovak Republic [↑](#footnote-ref-3)