

After 48 years in Korea

*A medical missionary
who spent her life
in Korea
sums up some
lessons about the
meeting of
East and West*

By FLORENCE MURRAY

■ I've retired three times from Korea. In 1961 on reaching the age limit for service in the United Church I retired as a medical missionary in Korea. Then when the Mission to Lepers asked me to help them out for two years, I did so. When I retired from that mission, Severance Hospital in Seoul took me back to work in their medical records department. Now I've retired for the third time and expect to remain in Canada, where I hope still to be able to do something for Korea.

What I want to get across to Canadians is that different people think differently. There is a tremendous misunderstanding between the people of the Eastern nations and us.

During the United States army occupation of Korea the military tried to help by providing food and clothing for some of the orphanages that sprang up after the war. One day an officer dropped in to see me. He was furious and declared that all Koreans were thieves. The day before he had taken several barrels of flour to an orphanage, and now on going into their storeroom he found every barrel gone. He just *knew* the people running the orphanage had sold the flour and put the money in their own pockets.

I asked him to sit down and cool off while I explained a few facts of life in Korea. The orphanage had no ovens to bake bread, they had no yeast to make it rise, they had no butter or jam to eat with it. They couldn't use straight flour. What they do with flour is have it made into noodles which they can boil on any fire, and add meat, vegetables, or whatever else they have for a meal.

Sure enough, when he checked again the next day, he found all the barrels of flour were now noodles. And the orphanage was very grateful.

It's a small incident but shows how distrust, accusations, and hatred can grow from lack of communication and understanding.

At that time there were thousands of U.S. servicemen and many American civilians in Seoul, and the army provided special buses for them. All a foreigner had to do to get on was to hold up a hand. On market days, farmers piled their produce on their bullock carts and came to the city, where they drove, as they always had, right down the middle of the streets. Why shouldn't they? They were their streets.

One day an army bus came up behind one of these farmer's carts. The driver honked his horn for the cart to get out of his way. The man on the cart paid no attention. The bus driver honked again and the farmer smiled and waved, but

kept on his way.

What the bus driver didn't know was that the farmer, hearing the honking, thought to himself, "The driver sees me, he'll look out for me," and continued serenely on his way.

The army driver thought the countryman was either too stupid or too stubborn to move over. He got down from his bus and gave the astonished farmer a good kick in the pants. Such conduct does nothing to promote good international relations.

Tolerance of other people's customs isn't enough. You have to understand the other person's viewpoint and why he does what he does. We should remember that some of our actions are equally difficult for them to understand, unless they know the motivation. That's why it is important to read our papers, watch TV, and conduct our business, particularly government business, with that in mind.

We consider lying despicable. But in Korea, if telling the truth will hurt someone's feelings, or cause him to lose face, many consider it preferable to tell a lie. This, in government, creates real difficulties. When you ask a question, or make a request, the Korean answers the way he thinks you want him to answer. It's the lesser of two evils for him. He'll tell you the truth if he knows that a lie now will hurt you more later. Only a very good friend will tell you something it will distress you to hear.

We consider stealing disgraceful. But most Koreans are influenced by the teaching of Confucius that a man's *first* responsibility is to his own family. The family looks after its own ill, its unemployed, its old, and its orphans. No one else has that responsibility, and other obligations to individuals or government come afterwards.

If a family or individual in the family has a good job, other relatives expect to share the good fortune. Their claims cannot be overlooked. I knew a doctor who had 20 persons in his household, his own and various nephews and nieces who had fled from the north and come to him to be cared for and educated. He did it, by the most strenuous efforts on his part, and by having to make his patients pay no matter how hard up some of them might be.

This principle even extends to government. After the Rhee government fell, the new government announced that anyone who had stolen more than twenty thousand dollars while in power would be punished. Up to that amount, it was generally understood, was only the reasonable provision anyone would make for his family when he had the oppor-



Dr. Florence Murray with an orphaned Korean amputee.

tunity. Beyond that amount was just going a little too far!

Korea is learning democracy but hasn't attained it yet. Old ways and new haven't been reconciled. It takes time to learn what democracy is or should be. Unless we understand this, we can be unreasonably critical of what goes on in that country.

After the war we moved into a house still undergoing repairs. Plumbers, carpenters, and painters were all over the place. At lunch time they sat down in the most comfortable chairs in the living room. As they understood democracy, those chairs were as much theirs as ours.

The ideas of democracy often produced strange fruit at first. One old grandfather in his long white robe and grey beard who formerly would have been treated with the greatest respect, found himself being pelted with mud by some small boys. When the old gentleman protested, the boys replied, "We

don't care what you say, Grandpa, we have democracy now and can do whatever we like." And they kept on throwing the mud.

Koreans are realizing that their old ways are in need of being reconsidered and some require change. Some years ago there was a movement, especially among Christians, for the establishment of co-operative societies. But who could be trusted to be treasurer? Who would have greater loyalty to the society than to his family? Sometimes missionaries were asked to be treasurer because they were considered trustworthy.

Last year at one of the Christian universities the son of the university president, a close relative of the President of the Republic of Korea, and the son of a wealthy man who offered a donation of a million won to the institution, all failed their entrance examinations. The admission committee reported this to the president and added that under the

circumstances they were going to admit the young men. The president replied that since they had failed they could not be admitted any more than any other students who hadn't made the grade. The committee was astonished that a man would stand up for his convictions in this way.

This news leaked out to the amazement of other university authorities who said, "We admire president P— but we don't know how he can do it." It isn't easy to do it in Korean society.

In medical work it wasn't enough just to heal people, especially sufferers from leprosy. You had also to help them to return to the community from which they had been driven out. But people think of a person who has had leprosy as a menace to society, even though he has undergone treatment and been rendered totally non-infectious. To change that idea, you have to change public opinion. That is not easily done in a society where there are still many uneducated people and where those in remote areas do not take even a single newspaper in the whole village, where they can't afford a radio, or where the radio reception is cut off by high mountains. Old prejudices die hard. The government a few years ago built a school for the healthy children of parents who were cured of their disease or still undergoing treatment. The local people marched to the mayor's office and threatened to burn down the school with the children in it if such a public health hazard were persisted in. The school was sold for a factory. Such injustices and hardships are the result of ignorance and prejudice.

In our leprosy work near Wonju an intensive educational campaign succeeded, and the families of all patients who were found to be free of leprosy bacilli were allowed to go to the new village we built. Now the children from the new village have been accepted into the public schools. So it seems an adequate campaign carried on long enough will in the end prove successful.

I first went to Korea 48 years ago. If any place is home to me, Korea is. Some of my Korean friends thought I should retire there because that's where most of my friends are. Some thought of me as part of their family and were willing to care for me in that tradition. But I came back to Canada, partly for family reasons, partly because I didn't wish ever to become a burden on Korean friends, but mainly I think because there are others now able to continue my work in Korea, and I hope still to have a few years to help promote better understanding between East and West. ■