

Excerpts from Marion Pope's Witness to the Kwangju Uprising, 1980

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Saturday, May 24, 1980, 6:15pm

Every night since last Sunday brought the realization of the possibility of death. Only on Monday morning at 6:00 AM when I was awakened from a brief sleep by the sound of someone shouting for everyone to "come out" did I feel fear. I dressed quickly (i.e. Put on my outer clothes; this week I have slept in the skirt and blouse I wore Monday to come to work). The shout was a call for the apartment residents to join the students and citizens fighting the paratroopers downtown. I thought there would be an emergency situation at the hospital so packed my passport and a change of underwear and add my usual books I was using to write my next assignment, and walked to Yangnim Dong. There were no taxis, buses or cars on the street, only one truck being turned around and sent away from the city and one filled with stones from a building site and driven by youths into town. I felt sensitive about walking toward the city with a bag, lest people think I were escaping to safety. It seems that all the people were out in the street.

How have the days and nights passed to become a week? It seems like an age come up yet one day. My greatest fear has been that the soldiers would come into the hospital and slaughter the young patients and the staff, and perhaps other patients too. The waiting is an aspect of the torture, a strong weapon.

How many have died, being shot or beaten, and captured? Surely the journalists will tell the news someday. In the meantime, we watch and wait, knowing that the hundreds of brave young people are being sacrificed and are struggling to death for the truth against all the lies being broadcast on the radio and from the sky.

Tonight, again, we are told the soldiers (paratroopers again) will come, that they will chase the students through our part of town, that we should flee. We do not seek death, nor run from it, but just keep on. Perhaps we shall see another dawn.

Now it is raining. The dawns have been brilliant, radiant with life all week.

May 27

The shooting started at 3:50 a.m. Tuesday, May 27, a few sharp rifle shots followed by machine gun and heavier ammunition—shells? At about 5:00 I could hear what sounded like tanks entering the city, above the sound of the helicopters, planes. We moved the children's cots (mattresses) and put up a quilt around the windows on the side that shells might come from and sat, waiting, silent for the most part. The struggle has been silenced, but not ended; more than ever I am sure it will now become stronger. Some 7 to 8 hundred lives, perhaps many more, will live on to win justice, truth, freedom. The viciousness of the paratroops has lit the torch for many previously probably uncommitted.

There was very little gun fire after that, except some sporadic shots from a distance until mid-morning, and the endless noise of helicopters and the plane broadcasting to the citizens.

The behaviour of the authorities in the next days and weeks will determine how many more will resolve to continue the struggle.

May 25, 1980 — A Letter from Marion to Her Mother

Dear Mom,

You will be worried I know. There is no way for anyone in Kwangju to contact anyone outside the city, but I will write this and post it at the first possible opportunity. I will phone, or have someone else phone, or cable to assure you all is well whenever I can. In the meantime, I am safe.

This last week has seemed like a long time, yet like one day. It has been hard to know which day of the week it was. I could write the events of each day but in the hope of getting this letter out I will not say much here. Because of this experience it is much easier to understand what is probably happening elsewhere in the world when listening to news reports on the radio. It is ludicrous to describe what is happening the way the news reports do. A few days ago I heard news items of events in Afghanistan and South Africa and was able to interpret them into a semblance of the truth. I heard that high school girls marched in Afghanistan and 20 died. I interpret that as 200. I heard that SWAPO guerillas fought with police in South Africa; I interpret that as youth and all the citizens struggling to reveal the truth, and at the last, desperate and hopeless, knowing they can trust no authority, knowing that they will die soon, just going on, struggling for justice and righteousness even in the midst of chaos. Certainly the students did not expect this hell. It is not of their making.

We are surrounded, all supplies and communications cut off. Incursions are made into different parts of the city every night, and more life is spent. And there are those who exploit the situation from every side. The enemy is within the city as well as without, invisible, sniping here and there. Up to now the toll should read ten times what is coming over the radio from abroad.

But what courage! I waited Monday morning for the hospital to start taking blood and was one of the first in the afternoon when they started, after the first victims began to arrive. But young people commandeered every kind of vehicle to bring in the injured and blood donors. The hospital staff worked on and on; no one need ask anyone to work overtime, two shifts or three, or to come back after a few hours rest. Our director of nurses went several days without sleep. We all found we couldn't sleep even when we lay down. Things are settled now but the torture is not knowing when the silk will start falling from the skies. No, that's not quite right. The silk, or at least part of it, has already fallen and is waiting outside, or is hidden within. Since you know what has happened in Seoul, you know that there is no hope of any amnesty here. It was the brutality of the silk on Monday that joined the citizens with the students. The silk left Tuesday but is waiting. Our ministers and lay leaders have struggled to open dialogue but they cannot get any authority to hear. And some church leaders who have never been conscious of the injustices are working simply to call in the arms, but not to protect the righteous, nor to relate the struggle to the cause and so not to related to any solution.

I spoke of courage. The church women took food to the patients and gave food to young people, knowing that the cost might be great. The hospital accepted every patient, knowing the cost to themselves. Helicopters circle the skies continuously. Planes broadcast and the radio tells us clearly of the consequences of feeding the hungry. And the sad thing is that many citizens misunderstand who the hungry are and call them bad names like the radio does. Like countless others, I have been taken in, fed and given a place to sleep in comfort since I can't go back and forth to my apartment in the suburbs; it is too dangerous. We don't know how long the food will last, perhaps another two weeks at the most. Criminal elements are stealing, and that injures the cause. To protect the cause some people are not reporting the thefts. How meaningful the scriptures become, how simple and true. Blessed are those that suffer. Feed the hungry. Shout, for the Lord has given you the city (Joshua 6). Today is Pentecost, encouraging.

I was glad to get Bob's letter. You said one of yours was in the mail but I haven't received it yet, and may not for some time. Give my love to all.