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## **Travels in a Quiet Land**

*By Michael Schindhelm*

**North Korea is a country where time has stood still. While its former communist allies have long since embarked on new paths, the isolated regime defies all efforts to bring about change. For a Western visitor it can be difficult to know if one is getting a rare glimpse of reality or partaking in a performance.**

It is a smooth landing on a seemingly endless runway, past fields of vegetables and corn, low pine groves and barbed-wire fences. After 10 minutes, the Airbus rumbles up to the modest terminal. Visitors are greeted by an enormous portrait of the "Great Leader," Kim Il Sung, on the roof of the building. The next day North Korea's Communist Party is holding its first assembly in 30 years. The outside world, which will not be a part of it, is speculating from afar about the country's future leadership.

The board in the arrivals hall is empty. Only one flight arrives here on normal days, usually from Beijing and sometimes from Vladivostok. A North Korean car takes us to downtown Pyongyang. The two doves in the brand logo represent the name of the company, Pyeonghwa (Peace), and symbolize the fact that the car is the result of a joint venture with South Korea.

Sitting next to me is Karin Janz, a 51-year-old Berlin native who has been running the office of German Agro Action (Welthungerhilfe), the only permanent base for a German aid organization in North Korea, since 2005. More than a third of North Korean children are considered malnourished. After Welthungerhilfe had distributed aid materials in the wake of catastrophic flooding in the mid-1990s, the organization was permitted to conduct development projects with agricultural cooperatives. Teaching people how to grow fruit and vegetables is better than distributing grain, says Janz.

### **Parallel Worlds**

She gives me a mobile phone with which I can make calls in North Korea and internationally. An attempt was made to introduce a mobile network a few years ago, but then the government ended up confiscating the phones, out of worries about espionage and fears that the world could find out more about the isolated country than the leadership wanted it to. Finally, an Egyptian communications company was hired to develop a new system. In an example of the parallel worlds that exist here, a separate network was developed for foreigners that cannot be used to dial Korean users.

We pass an access road lined with Chinese cypresses and poplar trees. Children are picking up leaves. Long lines of people in uniforms and civilian clothes pass by in both directions, even though there are no buildings in sight. Red banners in bright yellow rice fields tout the achievements of agricultural production.

Heineken is available in the pub next to the Koryo Hotel. The bar has apparently just run out of the domestic brand, Taedonggang. The décor -- heavy wooden furniture and an aquarium -- is reminiscent of bars in China. But in the North Korean version, the aquarium is empty and the television set on the wall is showing epic-looking scenes from the heroic everyday life of the People's Republic: workers in a steel mill, plows slicing into the Korean soil and anti-aircraft missiles protecting the Korean skies from attacks.

Only a few North Koreans are in the bar, enjoying the chicken, vegetables and rice on the menu. In China, an evening out would be a loud affair, but the people here whisper like theatergoers during a performance. Janz is one of fewer than 100 foreigners from the West who live in North Korea. It isn't easy to strike up a conversation with Koreans, she says, although they do like to talk about love and sex.

Pyongyang is bathed in warm autumn light. At 7 a.m., crowds of workers walk or take the bus to their factory jobs. There is hardly a car in sight, but there are formations of children, a patriotic song on their lips, holding artificial flowers on wooden sticks and waving little flags on their way to the socialist academies.

### **Late Communist Modern Style**

Divisions of recruits are gearing up to do digging work at the new cultural palace, which is almost complete, as if to prove that the prevailing "Military first!" doctrine clearly promotes the overall development of society.

The capital of North Korea is built in the late communist modern style, complete with high-rise apartment buildings made of prefabricated panels and bricks, boulevards that stretch for several kilometers, like Berlin's Karl-Marx-Allee, cutting deep slices into the urban geometry. Anyone who believes that iconic architecture is the invention of modern-day celebrity architects on an ego trip can see here that landmark planning truly comes into its own in a dictatorship of the proletariat. Pyongyang, with its monuments, theaters and sports arenas, is the epitome of grandiose design.

I am only permitted to explore the city with supervision. My guide is a gaunt, shy man, an employee of the Foreign Ministry. It is the day of the party convention being so hotly discussed in the outside world, but even my guide cannot tell me exactly where the comrades are in fact meeting. Or perhaps he doesn't want to tell me for security reasons.

He says that his son is learning Russian in school, because this could be valuable to him in his future professional life, and that he once learned Turkish in Sofia -- 20 years before Turkey established diplomatic relations with the People's Republic.

Although I am the only man from the West far and wide, my presence hardly attracts any attention at all. People walk past me reading newspapers, determined cyclists cross my path and a marching band is practicing in front of the theater. Even the people standing in an orderly line as they wait for the trolley bus seem to be in a hurry. Pyongyang residents are young and dynamic. In the coming days, it will be difficult to shake the impression that there are no old or frail people in the North Korean capital.

My hosts convince the authorities to allow me to visit the metro. Even a trip from the Triumphant Return station to the Blossoming Light station is permitted. This is apparently a great honor for a foreigner. Though built in the 1970s, the stations, with their frescoes and chandeliers, imitate the splendor of Stalin's Moscow metro. Issues of the daily newspaper are on display on the platform. Today's front page features the music for a new hymn to the party. The trains are made up of decommissioned cars from the old West Berlin subway. The interior, devoid of all advertising, exudes the coffee-brown Formica charm of 1970s Germany. There is graffiti scratched into the glass, but it's clearly left over from the cars' Berlin days.

### **Independence Is Strength**

A McDonald's look-alike fast food restaurant is tucked into the shadow of a triumphal arch, which is three meters taller than its Paris prototype and symbolizes victory over Japan. Although the restaurant isn't called McDonald's, it serves chicken burgers and French fries and looks almost exactly the same. Boys in suits and with gel in their hair crowd together at the counter. I am asked to pay in euros, and my change is a 20-cent coin with an image of the Brandenburg Gate on it.

Hamhung is a provincial capital northeast of Pyongyang, a center of North Korean industry. The factories there produce fertilizer and synthetic fibers to make the country less dependent on imports. By Korean standards, to be independent is to be strong. My Korean guide explains that the government is boosting domestic coal production to secure independent steel production. Since the collapse of the community of socialist economies in the early 1990s, North Korea has been a country left to its own devices. In the past, the government exported tractors to Siberia and imported grain from Ukraine in return. Today it is trying its hand at universal self-sufficiency, which includes computer technology. The government purchases computers abroad and has its engineers develop their own software -- secret codes instead of Windows.

Hamhung is set against a magnificent landscape reminiscent of Canadian province, British Columbia, a land of forested ridges, chestnut and oak trees and wide river valleys. We pass ox carts and decrepit, heavily laden Soviet-made trucks. I say to my guide that perhaps nature is a unique selling point in this country. I have to explain the expression to him, and he asks me to write it down.

The director of the European division at the Foreign Ministry is traveling with us. Even though his wife is a cousin of the "Dear Leader," Kim Jong Il, he too is witnessing this landscape for the first time. In fact, we are on an exclusive tour, with half the Western diplomatic corps sitting in the bus

with us. The British ambassador, who has been in office for two years, is making his third excursion from the capital today.

### **Germans Are 'Reliable Partners'**

We are on our way to a fruit plantation Welthungerhilfe has developed in collaboration with the North Korean agriculture agencies. About 2,000 people are part of the cooperative. If the weather cooperates, the farm will produce enough apples this year for 200,000 people. The Korean diplomat and the European ambassadors sit cross-legged at a picnic on the riverbank, making toasts to the coming harvest with whiskey and rice schnapps.

Although the province has no foreign residents, it does have an official in charge of relations with foreigners. He tells me that East German engineers in Hamhung once took a few women back to the former East Germany with them. But he doesn't seem to hold any grudges. He says that the Germans helped North Korea develop its economy and are now providing agricultural assistance, and that they are reliable partners. The North Korean chemicals industry, which isn't doing very well, he says, could also use some German help. I ask him how such a request is compatible with the country's drive to be self-sufficient. He smiles broadly and says that it's time to go.

It is dusk by the time we return to Pyongyang, and only a few strings of lights counter the encroaching darkness. No one has said a word so far about the party conference that took place today, and about the fact that the Dear Leader has secured the succession for his dynasty. No, says the Korean sitting next to me, the lights have nothing to do with it. They are for the anniversary of the Communist Party's establishment, he says. The party will celebrate its 65th birthday on Oct. 10.

The next morning, we travel along a perfectly straight, almost empty, four-lane highway to a farm in the northwest. Although getting stuck in a traffic jam isn't fun, driving on an empty road isn't exactly enjoyable either. The People's Republic of Korea apparently once had the aim of building a modern nation, complete with an efficient infrastructure to convey flows of people and goods. But then came the collapse of the Soviet Union and the development of the socialist market economy in neighboring China, and North Korea was left to fend for itself. My guide says that because the country has so little oil, only organizations and a few private individuals have cars. Buses are the primary mode of transportation, although they are rarely seen. We do encounter a double-decker along the way, though, as we shoot past people camping out and chatting on the road.

We visit a daycare center at the Taepjong Farm, about 200 kilometers (125 miles) from the capital, surrounded by the quiet of fields and forests and built with donations from Austria. The children belong to local cooperatives and spend most of their time separated from their families. This makes it easier to supervise them, and besides, the kindergarten guarantees better nutrition. Nevertheless, the children, aged two to five, who sing us a song in the courtyard, look noticeably small and delicate. A wall chart at the entrance lists the achievements of the child brigades in columns of little red stars.

## **Reunification -- on North Korea's Terms**

At the end of the trip, we drive along the highway toward the demarcation line. As it exits the city, the road passes between two giant female sculptures holding a Korean map between their outstretched arms -- the Reunification Monument. On the previous evening, I was surprised to hear a Korean intellectual who had studied in Leipzig attribute East Germany's demise to its leader Erich Honecker's opposition to German unity. Indeed, the North Koreans want nothing more than reunification with the south -- but on their terms.

Shortly before the border village of Panmunjom, an ordinary road sign indicates that it's only 70 kilometers from here to the South Korean capital, Seoul. Apart from a few rice farmers, there is not a soul to be seen. The site of the ceasefire agreement has been converted into a museum. In the parking lot in front of the building, a young woman asks me where I come from. She is a Chinese citizen from the border town of Dandong, and she is accompanying her father, a businessman, and his partners in North Korea. So a private economy and trade with China does exist, after all. I ask the young woman what she thinks about North Korea. It's a little quiet here, she says. On the other hand, she adds, they aren't destroying nature quite as much here as they do at home.

Later on, an officer takes us on a tour of the monument. He has us sit at the negotiating table, placing the Chinese where the North Korean representative once sat and having us sit on the chairs occupied by the Americans. Then he accompanies us to the actual border and points out the roofs of the village on the other side, a South Korean banner and the building in which, at the very same hour, the military negotiations suspended two years ago have now been resumed. My guide, who is here for the first time, is diligently taking pictures. The officer also poses for a snap in front of the border.

Pyongyang is shrouded in fog the next morning. I don't know if I have spent the last few days observing a slice of strictly protected reality or have taken part in a performance. Perhaps a little of both. It's a quiet country, North Korea. Hardly anyone speaks with its people, and the country itself rarely speaks with the outside world. Perhaps development aid can establish a dialogue where politicians fail.

My guide, shy at first, has become more talkative over time. Although we haven't talked about sex, our conversations have repeatedly returned to the idea of a unique selling point. He asks me if I want to come back.

I leave him and Janz, the German aid official, behind at passport control. They wave to me through a glass wall until I've disappeared into the hallway leading to the gate.

*Schindhelm, 50, an author and cultural consultant, was the director general of the Berlin opera foundation and later served as the cultural director of the Dubai Culture and Arts Authority until the summer of 2009.*

*Translated from the German by Christopher Sultan*