



I don't often write about things like this, but considering the times of materialism in which we live, I thought it might be fitting to remember a brave girl who found beauty and comfort in a cold harsh world.

During the late Choson era many of the Korean people lived in abject poverty, subsisting on the crops they were able to harvest each year and having little money for anything else. If they did manage to save a little money they were often quickly relieved of it through the squeezing taxes of the Yangban (nobility). Often the harvests failed and as a result, many people starved to death. Others, out of desperation, sold themselves or members of their family as slaves. It is difficult for us to understand but sometimes slavery in Korea was preferable to freedom. A slave was fed, clothed and sheltered by the slave's owner, but a free person was often left to fend for himself and sometimes starved to death during years of famine.

Ok Pun-ie was born in 1892. Her family, most likely farmers, was extremely poor, who barely eked out a living. They tried to provide for Pun-ie and her younger siblings the best that they could, but despite their best efforts; the children's lives were filled with hunger and cold. As time went by, the family's situation became more desperate until it probably climaxed in the great famine of 1901. Food was scarce and to the distraught parents it soon became obvious that unless something drastic was done, they would all perish. As was all too common in the past, the parents, in great sorrow, sold Pun-ie into slavery to a wealthy family for a quantity of food which they used to feed Pun-ie's siblings. She never saw her family again.

It is tragic to note that slavery had actually been abolished several times in the past. The last time slavery was abolished was during constitutional changes in the Korean government in the fall of 1895. According to Resolution 9, "male and female slavery, whether private or official, was to be abolished." However, laws are useless unless

enforced, and the law that was designed to protect Puni-ie, failed her.

Pun-ie's life as a slave was not a good one. Even though she was a small girl she was forced to work long hours in the elements, fed too little and beat too often. This continued until the winter of 1905 when on one cold day her life changed. For hours she had been exposed to the cold with little clothing and her hands and feet became frostbitten, yet she was given no medical attention. Days passed into weeks and the condition of her hands and feet grew worse, the pain intensified and eventually developed into gangrene, and though she tried, she was no longer able to work.

Her owners took her to one of the foreign hospitals in Seoul and explained to her that the foreign doctor would make her "well as soon as possible so that you can be of some use." The prognosis was bad, and the owners left her, no longer concerned about her fate. For eight months the young girl fought for her life, her days passed in fever induced states of delirium broken only by the horrific pain in her limbs, or after being anesthetized for surgery, sleeping in relative comfort. Remarkably Pun-ie often asked about her owners during her lucid moments but she was always told that they would not come and get her for a long time.

Pun-ie's final operation was completed in September 1906. The gangrene had been so severe the doctors had no other choice but to amputate both of her hands and one foot. Over the next months she was left to recuperate and become accustomed to her new life. Though she had only been a slave in the eyes of many, to the Western doctors and nurses of the hospital she soon became an inspiration.

During the Christmas season of 1906, Pun-ie noticed Minerva Guthapfel (a nurse) writing a letter to her friends in the United States. Pun-ie asked the nurse to please include a greeting from her: "the happiest girl in Korea." Nurse Guthapfel could not believe that this poor child could possibly think of herself as "the happiest girl in Korea," and asked her to explain why she felt that way.

Pun-ie gave six reasons. First, the doctors had taken away all of her pain. Second, she had not been beaten once since she had arrived at the hospital. Third, she no longer felt the pangs of intense hunger. Fourth, she was never going back to her owners but was instead to live the rest of her life in the hospital. Fifth, the small Christmas tree in the hospital was the first that she had ever seen, and she thought it was beautiful though it was nearly bare of ornaments. Finally, she had found God.

Over the next couple of years Pun-ie improved and always maintained her insistence that she was the happiest girl in Korea. Many people could not understand how she could remain so cheerful. One Korean woman even wondered why the doctors "didn't take the knife they used to cut off her hands, and put it through her heart." It would have saved "lots of trouble and lots of expense." They couldn't understand that Pun-ie gave something back in return _ she gave inspiration.

She became baptized and was no longer known as Pun-ie but as Anna Song. She learned to write with a pencil tied to the stumps of her hands, and though it was a laborious process, she wrote letters to the nurses that had befriended her and returned to the United States. Her story became known in the States and one woman, whose daughter had recovered from a severe illness, sent a wheelchair to Korea for Anna's use. She also served as an interpreter for the hospital and reminded others that their pains and sorrows were not as bad as they believed. There is always hope.

After 1910, the story of Anna Song faded from history (perhaps some of the religious libraries or archives in Korea might be able to add to this story) but she left us

her legacy. During this holiday season I think it's important that we think about those around us and the trials they face, and not concentrate so much upon our own, because often ours pale in comparison.