

To North Korea With Music

Donald Blinken

United States Ambassador to Hungary, 1994-1998

My diplomatic experience proved valuable on the historic New York Philharmonic Orchestra's February visit to North Korea in which my wife, Vera, and I participated.

Before our departure for Pyongyang, the advice offered to us was, "Take food, you will be hungry" and "Take warm clothes, you will be cold." One of our briefers, a Western diplomat living in Pyongyang comforted us by saying that staying in a hotel assured we would have both light and water at the same time. Because very few Americans have been to North Korea over the past 55 years (the United States and North Korea are still technically at war), we did not know what to expect. Also, such advice did not take into account our privileged status as guests of the government.

As our chartered South Korean Asiana Airlines 747 descended toward Pyongyang, our first impression was of a desolate landscape and an airport surrounded by barbed wire. We were the only visible passengers and the only jet in sight. There were three propeller-powered planes parked off in the distance.

The first sign that our hosts were eager to make us comfortable and put their best foot forward came immediately upon landing. After posing for group photos, we were promptly escorted to waiting heated buses and driven to our hotels. Our 24-member patron group stayed in a recently-built VIP hotel located in a secluded park. The hotel was built for Western visitors, principally Japanese, while the 120 members of the orchestra and the 80 members of the international press corps were housed on an island in a 45-story hotel built in the 1970s. Our hotel lobby featured acres of marble, blazing chandeliers and the ubiquitous portraits of the "Great Leader" Kim Il-sung (1912-1994), and his son, the "Dear Leader" Kim Jong-il. The lobby was heated, yet the corridors leading to our rooms were frigid. To conserve energy, the central heating was off, but our rooms, warmed by electric heaters, were stifling.

The urban scene was chilling. The streets were empty of people. There were no cars, and only a few pedestrians were walking or riding bicycles in this city of two million people. There was no visible commerce; no shops, no restaurants or vendors of any kind were seen. After dark, the overall impression was even more gloomy. There were no street lights, no traffic lights and the grandiose Soviet-style public buildings were lit up only for our benefit—a temporary display for show. The dismal communist-style apartment blocks had a single dim ceiling light per room.

If our North Korean hosts were making a point by providing us with too much heat, they made the same attempt to impress us with the quantity of food they served us. The buffet breakfast in the hotel dining room for the 24 of us could have fed an army. The buffet table was about 50 feet long and displayed a great variety of hot and cold dishes,

fruit, breads, eggs and every conceivable beverage. The two evening banquets we attended featured 14-course menus. We were uncomfortable with such excess for our benefit, knowing that the North Korean people are undernourished, and millions have starved.

As to the purpose of our visit, the concert itself proved to be an even greater success than we could have imagined. It was well-covered by international media, and television throughout the world showed pictures of the 1,500 seat hall with the American and North Korean flags on either side of the stage. The concert was broadcast live on North Korean television and radio. But, because there are only a few television sets, it is not known how many of North Korea's 23 million people could actually watch or listen. The majority of the North Koreans present were men in dark suits, hand-picked by the regime, all wearing lapel pins of the Dear Leader. There was a sprinkling of women wearing traditional Korean costumes.

After an unprecedented playing of the North Korean and American national anthems, the program featured music with American themes: Dvorak's "New World Symphony" and Gershwin's "An American in Paris." This music, new to most in the audience, was received with much applause. But the most moving moment of the evening followed the final encore. The piece was the Korean folk song, "Arirang," a ballad of separation which has become an anthem for the unification of North and South Korea. There were tears visible in the eyes of the North Koreans, and accompanying a five-minute standing ovation was an exchange of waves between the audience and the orchestra. The emotions were palpable; the North Koreans did not seem to want the evening and their connection with the outside world to end.

Together with the impression of a sad, impoverished nation, self-isolated from the outside world, we realized that the North Koreans have a great love for music and dance. They provide their talented children with focused, if rigid, training. We attended an impressive children's performance featuring a cast of hundreds which was unforgettable. Hopefully, that talent and energy will be harnessed one day to promote the values of an open society.

From the moment we arrived in Pyongyang, we were accompanied, at all times, by three "minders." They were polite, but kept their distance and spoke mainly to our American guide. Only on one occasion was there tension with them. On the first morning of sightseeing, our bus climbed a hill overlooking Pyongyang. At the summit, there stood a three-story-high heroic bronze statue of the "Great Leader" Kim Il-sung. Our minders had brought a bouquet of flowers to be placed by us at the base of the memorial. Sensing a potential diplomatic gaffe, I asked our guide to inform our "minders" that we were not getting off the bus. I used the excuse that we Americans do not honor our own deceased presidents in this manner, so we were not about to do so here. After much discussion urging us to get off the bus, the senior minder demurred and instructed the driver simply to circle the monument. As we did so, we realized why she had been so persistent. Waiting for us on the other side were half a dozen North Korean photographers ready to immortalize the Americans paying homage to the "Great Leader." We thus narrowly avoided a serious diplomatic embarrassment.

Was the visit of the New York Philharmonic to Pyongyang productive? It is too soon to know. Yet, the fact that it was supported by the North Korean government, and given the emotional response to the concert, it suggests that North Korea may be seeking a mild thaw in relations with the outside world. Our view was reinforced by the former Secretary of Defense, William Perry, whom I have known since we worked together on the Bosnian campaign when I served as Ambassador to Hungary. He is one of the few Americans to have visited North Korea frequently during the past two decades. I was delighted to see him at the banquet following the concert, where he told me that he viewed our visit and the concert as an important development and a great success.*

* *Editor's Note:* Leaders of The Korea Society worked closely with the New York Philharmonic to validate the original invitation from North Korea, received early last fall; traveled with Philharmonic President Zarin Mehta to Pyongyang last October to select the venue for the concert and make other key logistic arrangements; spoke publicly and wrote articles supporting the value of the concert; and helped brief members of the orchestra on what they would encounter in North Korea. On the day of the concert, following the inauguration of President Lee Myung-bak in Seoul, The Korea Society's Chairman Donald Gregg, President Evans Revere, and Board member Spencer Kim accompanied former Secretary of Defense Bill Perry in travelling directly to Pyongyang (which involved crossing the DMZ) to deliver a strong message to North Korea's chief nuclear negotiator, Vice Minister Kim Gye Gwan. They joined Secretary Perry in urging that Pyongyang move quickly to complete its nuclear negotiations with the Bush administration. This message was taken seriously by Vice Minister Kim, and progress continues to be made on this vital strategic issue. Secretary Perry's party then joined North Korean officials in attending the New York Philharmonic's magnificent concert. All concerned enjoyed it immensely.