

## At the Spring Site and Choe Ro Sa

### 샘물터에서

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The world history of war has produced many famous songs, mostly by war correspondents or composers.

Among them was an 18-year-old field nurse, a hardly believable fact.

She was poet Choe Ro Sa (1932-2011), Kim Il Sung Prize winner, who wrote the words of the song At the Spring Site, a representative wartime song in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea.

Her name as a Korean is rare to be found. Her father, who was a

writer, named her so in the meaning that “become as precious as dew of the sandy beach.” Her mother was an actress on the stage and aunt Choe Sung Hui, a famous dancer in the country. Probably for this reason, Choe Ro Sa caught the eyes of the public from her childhood for her attractive looks and artistic talent. Her activities at the art group of Kim Il Sung University were a good occasion for her to create literary works. However, she could not receive a tumultuous ovation on the stage owing to the armed invasion of the US imperialists against the DPRK in June 1950. The girl with bobbed hair volunteered to the front and became a nurse. But her enthusiasm for creating works was as strong as ever even in the grim period of the war. She carried with her bandages and study pocketbook permeated with the smell of gunpowder in her medic bag when she was engaged in treating wounded soldiers and marching.

In the autumn of 1950, the Korean People’s Army started a temporary strategic retreat. On her way to the Supreme Headquarters with wounded soldiers, she dropped in at a rural village. She headed for a spring site early in a misty morning to prepare breakfast for the wounded, and heard cheerful singing by girls from somewhere.

She was charmed by the voices as she was highly sensitive to music.

Oh, dear! The wounded, whom she had thought to have been in sleep, got up early and were talking to girls of the village intimately and washing at the spring site listening to their songs!

Water jars were put in order nearby the spring site. It seemed that the girls who came out there to fetch water gathered one after another to help the wounded washing.

Beautiful home village, tales about a prosperous tomorrow, requests by girls to return in triumph, and the pledge of the soldiers full of confidence.

“Come again on Victory day!”

They were picturing in their mind the victorious tomorrow. The soaring poetic impulse made Choe Ro Sa jot down on her pocketbook what she had seen and heard, leaning against a rock.

1. I went to the spring with a water jar on my head.

A soldier stopped washing and bashfully turned aside.

I found him doing a bad job

And though abashed I asked him if I could help him.

At that time, she never imagined that her poor poetical work would be a popular masterpiece enjoyed by all the Koreans.

Later, Kim Il Sung, supreme commander of the Korean People's Army, ensured that soldiers fighting on the front, who had been college students, were recalled to their colleges, looking far ahead into the victorious tomorrow of the country.

In spring the following year she was transplanting rice to help farmers together with her classmates as she became a student again. At that moment, she heard half a dozen soldiers singing passing through the ridges of the paddy fields, a familiar song to her, and she could not believe her ears.

"Look here, soldiers, don't you know who wrote the words of the song?"

"Oh, don't you know it yet? She's a young nurse named Choe Ro Sa. Don't you know that she has become a famous poet at the age of 18? A masterpiece! The whole front knows about this..."

Choe Ro Sa was in tears, dropping the bundle of rice seedlings and thought how her poor poet of study could be adapted to a song!

On her way back to the university from the front, she happened to meet in Pyongyang the former head of the art group of her university.

The meeting of lovers was charged with emotion. The young man happened to see a pocketbook containing the poems written by her.

Later, he showed his colleagues the poem At the Spring Site in the pocketbook. Composer Yun Sung Jin, who was reading the poem over his shoulder, promptly snatched the book from him.

“What a good poem it is! Music comes by itself. I will compose for the song!”

At first, an art troupe portrayed the song as a chorus, and it was very popular from its premier performance. Later, the song was depicted as chorus, solo and mixed chorus and spread to the whole front, towns, villages and other parts of the country.

President Kim Il Sung said on several occasions that many good songs were produced in wartime. In August 1991, saying that the girl writer who wrote the wartime song *At the Spring Site* at the age of 18 fought as a soldier of the KPA during the war and created it in the trench, Chairman Kim Jong Il highly appreciated her, saying that was a feat she had performed.

“Come again on Victory day,” the last line of the fourth stanza of the song, became daily words of women when seeing off their husbands leaving for the front, and soldiers fought with those words always keeping in their mind.

Choe Ro Sa said, “My first work *At the Spring Site* served as an occasion for me to become a poet.”

She found poetic words and repeated phrases with details of life rich in national elements and flavour, and skilfully retained the rhythm of traditional 4-4 syllable meter.

The work proved to be a great hit even among foreigners. In the 1970s V. Gradov and T. Khrennikov, Russian poets, said:

“*At the Spring Site* is a song that is easily sung by people. *Mungyong Pass* is a song symbolic of the advance of the Korean People’s Army into southern part of Korea, while *At the Spring Site* is a song predicting victory in the war filled with optimism. The latter portrays the crystal-clear hearts of girls in a village and the confidence of soldiers in their victory in the war. It is really a Korean-style song. What is impressive is that the song deals with water jars used by the Korean women, folk song *The Nodul Riverside* and the words of girls leaving soldiers off.

War veterans, together with their children and grandchildren, sing

the song they sang on the front during the war in their youth.  
It will resound more impressively along with all other wartime songs  
in the next year which will mark the 70th anniversary of the victory  
in the Fatherland Liberation War.

The following is the full text of the song for readers who enjoy  
music. It will help you have a taste of the Korean song when it is  
played with the piano, accordion, guitar and other musical  
instruments accompanied by the melody.

2. I went to the spring with a water jar on my head.

A soldier on kitchen duty was there to wash rice

I put down the jar and snatched the rice vessel

And though abashed I said I would do it for him.

3. I went to the spring with a water jar on my head.

The familiar soldiers surrounded me.

They asked: Pretty girl, sing a song for us

And though abashed I sang the spring song The Nodul Riverside.

4. I went to the spring with a water jar on my head.

The dear comrades said they were going to the front.

I picked azaleas on the spring in a hurry

And repeatedly asked them to come again on Victory day.

**U Jong Hwan** 2022-12-05