

## THE SPRING OF DISCONTENT

an eyewitness account by Lily Rose R. Tope

IT ALMOST NEVER RAINS in spring but Beijing had a downpour that afternoon, shielding everyone inside the building from external noise. No one would have noticed that something eventful was happening had it not been for the fact that the rain suddenly took on the beat of a chant or a cheer. Then the corridor broke into pandemonium. An American neighbor grabbed her camera and dashed into the rain. "The Beijing University students are marching!" she cried. That was April 15, 1989. Hu Yaobang had just died. The 1989 pro-democracy movement had begun.

The evening news from then on carried footages of students occupying Tiananmen Square. The number of students in the Square grew; so did the number of sympathizers. The government alternately praised and criticized the students. Tension mounted when students confronted the police at the national leaders' residential compound. Classes were disrupted in the universities. The students decided to go on hunger strike, intending to shame their leaders into giving in to their demands. China made the front page internationally. The student movement had caught the imagination of the world.

We foreign students could only watch the events unfold from the sidelines. Many of us sympathized with the demonstrators but we were advised not to meddle in something that did not concern us. Then censorship was enforced. The news blackout deprived us of our only means of keeping track of the events. The highlights, the world saw. The sidelights, what went on outside of Tiananmen, that is what we saw.

The fervor initiated by the Beijing University students spread rapidly throughout the university area. Days after the April 15 march, our small institute's placid campus rose from its complacency and

manifested a restiveness that could only have resulted from the previous days' events. A wall beside the volleyball courts was converted into a gigantic news board. A kaleidoscope of posters bannered the students' demands as well as the hourly reports that couriers brought back from Tiananmen. Called "democracy wall" (a term that was carried over from the similar student-led pro-democracy movement in 1986), this wall became our only link with Tiananmen.

A loud speaker was erected above the wall. The students conducted their own news broadcasts, their rendition of the news clashing with that of government television. People had taken to leaving their TV sets during broadcast time to converge before the democracy wall. Everyday, at six in the morning, a campus-wide radio news broadcast blared the events of the previous day. The students drowned the announcer's voice by playing the "Internationale" not only once but twice or thrice.

Photos taken of the Tiananmen demonstrators appeared and were sold at the foreign students' cafeteria. This despite warning from the authorities that unauthorized pictures of Tiananmen would be confiscated. Photo developers outside the campus never heeded the warning and inadvertently participated in the movement by developing the photos, knowing these shots would reach various parts of the globe.

The fact that we were Filipinos excited people outside the campus. They would talk about people power and Cory Aquino while they expressed their wish for a similar political success.

Our teachers began to talk, the younger ones more vocal about their ideas. They too became our link with Tiananmen. With typical Chinese caution, they explained the issues to us but tried not to incriminate themselves by avoiding categorical statements. Filling the gaps, though, was not difficult.

Two weeks after the boycott of classes, many schools resumed classes. Beijing University, the seat of dissent, did not. A group of us Filipinos decided to pay the campus a visit.

Beijing University has one of the most beautiful campuses in China, its sprawling grounds punctuated by pockets of gardens, pagodas and ponds. However, the serene picture it made belied the urgency with which its student leaders planned their next moves. Headquarters for the leaders meant either the publication office or a makeshift conference hall in one of the dormitory rooms. The location of both moved



periodically. After a couple of unsuccessful attempts, we finally located the publication office. Banners, being readied for student marchers, were strewn all over the floor. An antiquated mimeographing machine churned out hand-outs. A Caucasian woman journalist was already interviewing one of the students. The student leaders we spoke with enthusiastically answered our questions and from the babble of English and Chinese voices, the following positions came out loud and clear: One, the students are not against socialism, they still think this is the best system for China; two, all they want is that the Party institute reforms and that it be more responsive to current needs; three, change through violent means is feasible; four, Deng is too old and has wielded power too long; and five, Deng's economic reforms have brought about an improvement in the standard of living, but the political reforms are long in coming.

May 17 was warm and windy. It would have been an uneventful day had not Gorbachev chosen this day to visit Tiananmen. That afternoon, the teachers in our institute decided to throw their lot with the demonstrators. Despite the risk to job and limb, they marched to where Gorbachev was allegedly having a meeting with Deng. It was a festive march — the ladies donned their straw hats while the men tied red bands around their arms. My young teacher was there, that was expected. My elderly teacher was there, too. That was unexpected. We Filipino students decided we were not going to let history pass us by. In unexpressed solidarity with our teachers and Chinese schoolmates, we went to Tiananmen to be counted.

It turned out to be the biggest rally in Beijing since the 1989 movement began. Authorities prohibited buses from operating to prevent students and residents from reaching Tiananmen. But the people will not be denied. They went by bicycle or commandeered cargo trucks. We were lucky we caught a rare taxi. Ordinarily, we are wary of taxis because of drivers who are on the make. Our driver was different. When he learned that we were going to Tiananmen, he refused payment.

Nearly a million people gathered on Tiananmen that day. There were bakers just off their shift, nurses still in uniform, nursery school teachers, writers, taxi drivers, workers who came with their shift mates, movie actors, dancers, athletes, throngs of students, pedestrians and vendors. Policemen kept out of sight. Except for the students who were

waging a hunger strike and who occupied the base of the People's Monument, everybody was in a festive mood.

Students kept order by directing traffic, allowing ambulances which ferried fallen hunger strikers to reach the nearest hospitals. Medical tents around the Square administered first aid. Vendors found trade lucrative; they donated part of their profits to the students.

The camaraderie and the innocence of Tiananmen Square reminded me of EDSA in 1986. It would have been *deja vu* except for the fact that at EDSA we expected to be attacked by the Marcos forces; the people at Tiananmen believed that the People's Liberation Army would never fire at civilians. The Army loves the people, they said.

On our way home, our group together with a bunch of Chinese students, commandeered an empty bus whose driver was just too glad to accommodate Tiananmen veterans. Outside Tiananmen, people lined the streets. They clapped and cheered as our bus sped by. Students and pedestrians flashed the victory sign at each other. At that moment, we, too, despite our foreignness, felt like heroes.

Later, at about 2 a.m., we abandoned sleep and again joined the people in the streets. There was talk that soldiers were coming in from the provinces. The whole city seemed to be waiting for them. Students erected barricades at the nearby railroad track. If that did not work, they were going to lie on the tracks. A tragedy seemed imminent. However, no soldier arrived that day and tragedy struck two weeks later.

Then martial law was declared. Chinese officials went on television prohibiting people from joining or sympathizing with the demonstrators. A foreign TV network was ordered to pack up. Foreigners were not allowed to go to the Tiananmen Square. We had to reassure our families we were alright.

The democracy wall news told us of the official order to disperse the student demonstrators and the police's refusal to obey orders, of military trainees marching into the ranks of demonstrators only to be the object of the people's wrath, of soldiers' astonishment at the sight of the crowd and their ignorance of their mission, of Zhao Ziyang's fall from grace, of similar demonstrations being staged in various parts of the country in solidarity with the Beijing students and of the students' interception of a convoy of military trucks filled with guns.

Meanwhile, the students' month-long vigil was taking its toll. Con-



flicts erupted within the ranks. Many signified their wish to return home. We expected the movement to fizzle out any moment.

On the evening of June 3, the flyover in Jianguomenwai teemed with people blocking a long line of military trucks. A student stood on the hood of a truck and harangued the beleaguered students. Youths handed them old issues of newspapers to inform them of the real circumstances at Tiananmen. An old woman distributed sandwiches among the soldiers while berating them for fighting the students. The presence of the soldiers turned the night from heady to grim.

In the early hours of June 4, we were awakened by a rumbling sound. From the window, we saw columns of tanks rolling towards the direction of Tiananmen Square. Being in Jianguomenwai at that time, we knew it would only be a matter of minutes before the tanks reached Tiananmen. Sure enough, in about ten minutes, we heard bursts of machine gun fire. The gunfire lasted for about twenty minutes; it was followed by a deafening silence. We grabbed a shortwave radio, hoping to get some news from the foreign broadcasts. We heard about the attack on Tiananmen from BBC and Voice of America. Local stations were off the air.

The next day, there was a general rush to the airport. People feared a possible confrontation between army factions friendly to the students and those loyal to the government. The bigger stores were closed as a precaution against looting. Burnt trucks blockaded the city streets. The road partitions were flattened by tank tires. People converged in groups in street corners discussing the night's events or morbidly listening to the gory stories of someone who saw it all. Everyone talked in whispers. Tiananmen was just a stone's throw away.

By midmorning, our Institute's Chinese students had returned. Many were bedraggled and in tears. A student carried the lifeless body of a boy who had a bullet hole in his chest. The student grabbed the boy in the melee; the boy died in his arms. He did not know where the boy's parents were. The students silently paraded the boy's body around the campus, the dead boy an irrevocable testimony to the previous night's slaughter.

The crackdown had begun.

TODAY, months later, an uneasy peace reigns in Beijing. Soldiers have vacated Tiananmen Square and a semblance of normalcy has

returned. Executions have been effected and the crackdown continues to haunt student fugitives. Apparently, the lessons have been learned. Beijing University underwent intense political education before classes opened. The rumblings have abated. This was how 1989, like 1986, ended, like an open-ended chapter. Until the next season of discontent begins.