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Don't Cry, This Land Is Rich in Kims and Lees

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Body

Thirty years ago, the future seemed bleak for Sang Hyun Kim, a poor farm boy from South Korea, so he packed his bags and headed for Argentina, in search of the great American dream.

Today, it seems that Mr. Kim, who once worked on an Argentine peanut farm, has found that dream. Now 52 and an insurance entrepreneur, he is one of 35,000 South Korean immigrants who make up a prosperous and closely knit population here that is often the envy of other Argentines.

Since arriving in 1965, Mr. Kim, who speaks Spanish like a native, has brought nine of his siblings from Korea to Argentina, and all of them now own thriving businesses.

"In Korea, there were too many people and too few economic opportunities," Mr. Kim said. "When I arrived in Argentina, I thought it was a paradise, like virgin territory ripe for the harvesting if you were willing to work hard. And Koreans work very, very hard."

Indeed, the success of South Koreans in Argentina is particularly evident in the garment districts of Once and Flores here, where textile and retail businesses displaying Korean signs are quickly overshadowing establishments started decades ago by Jewish and Armenian immigrants.

The South Koreans operate more than 1,000 businesses in Argentina, including textile factories, electronics stores, pharmacies, real estate agencies, newspapers and a cable television channel, according to statistics provided by the South Korean Embassy. There are also 300 Korean cultural, athletic and business associations and 30 Protestant churches with predominantly Korean congregations.

Several shop owners in the largely Jewish garment district, speaking on condition of anonymity, complained that the South Koreans were "taking over the neighborhood."

The shop owners accused the South Koreans of selling merchandise at unfairly low prices because they reduced their costs by working 12 to 14 hours a day and hiring cheap labor from Bolivia.

Sociologists here say South Koreans represent the latest wave of skilled immigrants to come to Argentina since the huge influx of immigrants from Europe at the turn of the century.

To ease overcrowding in South Korea in the early 1960's, its Government sent missions to South America to forge immigration policies for its citizens. To persuade countries to accept South Koreans, the Government allowed its citizens to take as much as \$40,000 with them to South America. The first to immigrate to South America went to Brazil in 1961. Argentina, Paraguay and Chile received the next wave four years later.

Many South Koreans chose to go to Argentina because there were fewer other Asians there, and thus what they saw as greater entrepreneurial opportunities.

From 1965 to 1985, about 6,000 South Koreans came to Argentina, and by 1985 the number had swelled to 50,000. But in the late 1980's the number of South Koreans in Argentina declined as many left for North America during the hard economic times caused by hyperinflation.

The sociologists attribute the success of the South Koreans to their entrepreneurship, access to shared credit and employment of family and cheap labor from neighboring countries.

"It is a community on the rise, both socially and economically," said Jorge Balan, a sociologist for the Center for Studies of State and Society, a think tank.

"Their great community cohesion and large families make them thrive in an informal economy. They contribute to the notion that we are still a place where immigrants want to come."

Still, settling in Argentina, where 90 percent of the population is of European stock, has not come easy for some South Koreans, who complain that they have encountered discrimination, which they say is partly owing to their race and partly to their good fortune here.

"There is discrimination because I am Korean, because I have an Oriental face," said Gunbae Kim, who came to Argentina three years ago and now imports mannequins from Korea.

He said, for example, that a Korean driver might be stopped more often than a native Argentine would be by a policeman looking for a bribe, even if the driver had not committed a traffic violation.

Adrianna Kim, 24, who runs a wholesale garment shop, said that after 10 years here, she feels basically at home.

"There is not so much discrimination in the streets, but there is always somebody who doesn't treat you well," she said. "At times, I did feel discrimination when I was at school."

Mr. Balan, the sociologist, said he believed that Koreans are experiencing the same amount of discrimination that other recent immigrants have felt in Argentina and in other countries.

"People ***don't*** throw tomatoes at them, but Koreans receive the same animosity and prejudices that the Jews had to go through," he said.

Perhaps some of that animosity toward Koreans stems from the current downturn in Argentina's economy and record level of unemployment.

"It's nice to have people from abroad but let Argentines get jobs first," said Victor Angel Orona, a taxi driver.

The image of South Koreans was hurt badly two years ago when local newspapers published a series of reports accusing several South Korean garment factories of operating sweat shops in which undocumented Bolivians were forced to work like "slaves."

Nico Kim, a 25-year-old student, who owns a film developing shop in the upscale Northside, said Argentines seem to see the Koreans as a monolith.

"Like in every race, there are good and bad Koreans," he said. "As people generally despise what they do not know, when some Koreans do something bad, there is a tendency to think that all Koreans are the same."

Now that the South Korean population has attained economic success in Argentina, its leaders say they are starting to focus their efforts on increasing education and political power.

Key Sung Cho, South Korean Ambassador to Argentina, said a major goal of South Koreans here is to send the second and third generations to college and eventually run a few candidates for public office.

Tony Kuo, who came to Argentina 22 years ago and owns a retailing shop, said that while his ethnic heritage is important to him and that he sends his children to a Korean school on the weekends, he is proud to be an Argentine citizen.

"When I returned to Korea in 1992, I missed Argentina," Mr. Kuo said. "The only reason I would leave Argentina is if I lose my business."

Graphic

Photo: Among the many successful Koreans in Argentina is Gunbae Kim, who operates a mannequin business. But the life is not perfect. "There is discrimination because I am Korean, because I have an Oriental face," he said. Horacio Paone for The New York Times)

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