

Review Essay

A VOICE FROM
THE NORTH KOREAN GULAG

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North Korea is widely and rightly viewed as an extremely repressive authoritarian country, but the actual nature of the dictatorship that rules it remains something of a mystery even to most of those who follow international politics and human rights. One reason for this is that North Korea is the world's least accessible country to journalists and human-rights monitors, which makes it hard to verify the many horrendous abuses that defectors and prison-camp survivors report.

Hiding what is happening inside North Korea is among the tools that the xenophobic communist regime of the Kim family uses in order to maintain its power. As Kim Jong Il (1994–2011), the son of dictator Kim Il Sung (1948–94) and father of current dictator Kim Jong Un (2011–), once said: “We must envelop our environment in a dense fog to prevent our enemies from learning anything about us.”¹ This strategy of concealment has also been served by North Korea's nuclear-weapons program and missile launches, which have diverted international attention from the country's internal problems and generated controversies that have overshadowed concerns about human-rights violations.

The North Korean system also is hard to understand because it is so different from ordinary autocracies. North Korea and its neighbor China are both called dictatorships and are rated “Not Free” by Freedom House, but North Koreans go to extreme lengths to escape to China. Is China an open country compared to North Korea? And if China is nonetheless a dictatorship, which it is, what then is North Korea?

Even Václav Havel, the great Czech leader and freedom fighter, had

difficulty understanding the real nature of the North Korean system. In September 2002, when he met with a South Korean delegation visiting Prague to prepare for an international conference on human rights in North Korea, he told them, “Our country had the same problem of oppression on people’s ideas not too long ago, which makes us pay keen attention to the problems in North Korea.” Havel added that “even a small-sized opposition group can trigger big changes when spurred and aided by . . . external supporters.” The South Koreans replied that the “formation of . . . organized dissident groups is almost impossible due to the regime’s tight control over the people and the vast and inhumane system of prison camps.”² Havel soon learned that North Korea was very different from communist Czechoslovakia. He wrote an article comparing North Korea’s “system of concentration camps” to the Soviet gulag and calling Kim Jong Il “the world’s worst totalitarian dictator, a man responsible for the loss of millions of lives.”³

Over the past decade, as tens of thousands of North Koreans have fled the oppressive and famine-stricken country, information about North Korea and its prison camps has begun to reach the outside world. A growing number of reports have been published on conditions inside North Korea, many of them issued by the Committee for Human Rights in North Korea (HRNK). These include the second edition of *The Hidden Gulag*, HRNK’s pathbreaking report on the system of forced-labor concentration camps—called *kwan-li-so*—which hold as many as 200,000 inmates.⁴ It is based on interviews with more than sixty former prisoners and contains more than forty high-resolution satellite photographs identifying not just the prison camps themselves—whose existence the regime continues to deny—but specific facilities within them, from prisoner barracks and guard towers to coal-mine entrances and execution sites. Other important studies have also appeared, such as Barbara Demick’s *Nothing to Envy: Ordinary Lives in North Korea* and Chol-hwan Kang’s prison memoir *The Aquariums of Pyongyang*.⁵

The documentation contained in these materials has helped to spur greater international criticism of North Korea. Since 2005, the UN has annually adopted a resolution on North Korea—most recently by consensus—expressing “very serious concern” at reports of “systematic, widespread and grave violations of civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights,” as well as of “the existence of a large number of prison camps and the extensive use of forced labor.” Most recently, Navanethem Pillay, the UN high commissioner for human rights, has called for the establishment of a commission of inquiry into the massive human-rights abuses reportedly taking place in North Korea.

As important as all these developments have been, nothing until now has had as great an impact on public opinion as *Escape from Camp 14*,⁶ a short but powerful new book that tells the story of Shin Dong-hyuk, the only person born and raised in North Korea’s prison camps

to have escaped to tell what happened there—and what continues to happen every day. His is the most compelling and influential memoir yet written about the camps. The book has made Shin, whom the CBS news program *60 Minutes* profiled in December 2012, the best-known North Korean defector and a voice to the world on behalf of the most oppressed and abandoned people in the most closed and isolated country on the face of the earth.

Almost Too Horrible to Believe

Shin's personal story, including an account of how he was forced to witness his mother and brother being publicly executed for trying to escape, is almost too horrible to be believed. Its power is that it is told factually and without embellishment by a distinguished journalist, the *Washington Post's* Blaine Harden, with a well-earned reputation for professionalism and responsible reporting.

Shin was born in 1982 in sprawling Camp 14 on the Taedong River about eighty kilometers northeast of Pyongyang. He was the product of a marriage arranged by prison guards as a reward for his father's work in the camp's machine shop. Shin barely knew his father or older brother, and he viewed his mother, according to Harden, as "competition for survival" since he was always hungry and would often steal her food, for which she would beat him mercilessly (16). When he was old enough to go to school, he was informed that he was a prisoner because of the sins of his parents, and that he could lessen his inherent sinfulness—and improve his survival chances—by working hard, obeying the guards, and informing even on his parents.

The experiences that Shin recalls and Harden recounts expose the terrible yet routine cruelty of the camps. One victim Shin remembers was an "exceptionally pretty" six-year-old girl in his class who was beaten to death by her teacher, who had found five kernels of corn in her pocket. When he discovered the corn, he shouted, "You bitch, you stole corn? You want your hands cut off?" She had broken subsection 3 of the camp's third rule: "Anyone who steals or conceals any foodstuffs will be shot immediately" (25).

When Shin was nine years old, he and thirty of his classmates were violently assaulted as they walked past the compound housing the camp guards' children, who rained heavy stones down on the child prisoners, shouting "Reactionary sons of bitches are coming!" The "teacher" of the bloodied prison children ordered them back to work immediately, and when they asked what they should do with those who were still unconscious from being struck by the stones, he shouted, "Put them on your backs and carry them. All you need to do is work hard" (34).

This was Shin's introduction to the North Korean caste system called *songbun*. A third of the country's 23 million people belong to the bot-

tom caste, which is considered hostile or disloyal and has suffered the most from the camps and the famine that gripped the country in the mid-1990s. Harden quotes a former camp guard and driver who fled to China in 1994 as saying, “The theory behind the camps was to cleanse unto three generations the families of incorrect thinkers” (37). This theory of “cleansing” explains why a child would be imprisoned along with his or her parent or grandparent. It also explains why the newborn babies of female prisoners (who were preyed on sexually by the camp guards) were clubbed to death with iron rods. It was also common for such mothers to be murdered.

Shin told Harden that an assignment to work in the coal mines was the equivalent of a death sentence. Shin was fortunate to be sent to work on a pig farm and later in a garment factory, but when he dropped a sewing machine the guards cut off part of his right middle finger with a kitchen knife.

The most excruciating part of the story begins when the twelve-year-old Shin overhears a conversation between his mother and older brother about an attempted escape. Shin knew perfectly well the first rule of Camp 14: “Any witness to an attempted escape who fails to report it will be shot immediately” (193). Even if he did not inform on them, he knew that he would be tortured and probably killed as retaliation if they attempted to flee. By snitching, he might be able to save himself, and that is what he did.

As it happened, the guard to whom he snitched claimed all the credit for discovering the plot, and Shin was arrested and horribly tortured until a classmate confirmed his story. Shin spent the next seven months in a prison cell until he was taken with his father to an empty wheatfield that served as the camp’s execution ground. Shin thought that he and his father were the ones to be put to death. Then the guards sat them in front of the crowd and dragged out Shin’s mother and brother, whom the guards announced would be executed as “traitors of the people.” Shin’s mother was hanged, and three guards gunned down his brother. “It was a bloody, brain-splattered mess of a killing,” writes Harden, “a spectacle that sickened and frightened Shin” (66).

Shin spent the next ten years moving from one job to another, sharpening his survival skills, and never thinking of suicide or escape. Unlike prisoners who arrived in Camp 14 from the outside, he had no expectations and never experienced hopelessness. “He had no hope to lose,” Harden writes, “no past to mourn, no pride to defend” (73).

But this changed when Shin was paired with a new prisoner, Park Yong Chul, who had held a high-profile job before being arrested and sent to Camp 14. Shin’s job was to spy on Park. Instead, Shin became transfixed by Park’s stories, especially about food and eating, and chose not to snitch—“the first free decision of his life,” according to Harden (99). Together, Shin and his new friend plotted their escape.

Their chance came when they were sent to work far up the mountain, near the camp's fence of high-voltage barbed wire. Park reached the fence first, but was electrocuted when he tried to crawl through. Shin was able to crawl over Park's body, which insulated him from the worst effects of the electric current, though he suffered burns more serious than at first he realized. But he had survived, and he immediately started heading in the only direction he could comprehend, which was down the other side of the mountain.

Nothing conveys the horror of life inside the camps more powerfully than Shin's feeling of liberation in the days immediately after his escape. By any normal standard, his circumstances were desperate. He was without food or any place to sleep, ill-clothed in the bitter cold, and with legs burned and bloodied from the escape. Suddenly, however, he was wandering in a new world, with no guards in sight. As Harden writes:

It was not meaningful to him that North Korea in the dead of winter is ugly, dirty, and dark, or that it is poorer than Sudan, or that, taken as a whole, it is viewed by human rights groups as the world's largest prison.

His context had been twenty-three years in an open-air cage run by men who hanged his mother, shot his brother, crippled his father, murdered pregnant women, beat children to death, taught him to betray his family, and tortured him over a fire.

He felt wonderfully free—and, as best he could determine, no one was looking for him (121).

The Beginnings of Change

Shin could not know it, but the country that he discovered outside the camp was in what the editor of *Rimjin-gang*, a Japan-based journal that compiles anonymous eyewitness accounts of life inside North Korea, including photographs and videos, told Harden was “a drastic state of change” (131). This change made Shin's escape and trek toward freedom possible. Even today not fully apparent to the outside world, the change began in the 1990s with famine and the breakdown of the state system for distributing food, which led to the growth of private markets that have become essential to North Koreans' survival. “Shin did not yet know this,” Harden writes, “but grassroots capitalism, vagabond trading, and rampant corruption were creating cracks in the police state that surrounded Camp 14” (85). Laws were ignored, police could be bribed, and military vehicles became profit-making *servi-cha* (service cars) that gave people mobility. Shin could find cover from the state in this world, and also food and shelter. “By keeping his mouth shut and his eyes open,” Harden writes, Shin “entered the slipstream of smuggling, trading, and petty bribery that had become North Korea's postfamine economy” (126).

With the growth of unprecedented mobility, the borders of North

Korea had suddenly become more permeable. Harden writes that the catastrophic famine and the importance of Chinese foodstuffs in feeding the population forced the North Korean regime “to tolerate a porous border with China,” even to the point of allowing people “to cross back and forth into China legally” (140). In addition to allowing food to enter North Korea, the porous border has contributed to the breakdown of what scholar Andrei Lankov has called the North Korean regime’s information blockade.⁷ As Harden reports, old Chinese televisions as well as video players, three-dollar radios, videotapes, compact discs, and flash drives are now regularly smuggled into the country, and people increasingly have the ability to listen to the Voice of America, Radio Free Asia, and other international broadcasts. Harden calls the two-million ethnic Koreans living in northeast China “an unsung force for cultural change inside North Korea” (148). They help to smuggle into the country hundreds of thousands of compact discs with South Korean soap operas and other programs that give North Koreans a new window on the outside world—and expose the North Korean regime’s systematic lies about it.

And then, of course, there are the stations and information networks run by the defectors and their allies in South Korea, which, according to Harden, not only send information into North Korea but “have revolutionized news coverage” of the country (152). In 2002, he notes, it took months for news of the reforms easing restrictions on private markets to reach the outside world. In 2009, the new independent media reported the disastrous currency reform within hours.

This raises the most important new development over the past decade, which is the resettlement in South Korea of some 25,000 North Korean defectors. Though Pyongyang and Beijing are doing everything they can to close off escape routes—including shooting evaders on sight and forcibly sending defectors back to face horrible punishment in North Korea—desperate North Koreans nonetheless continue to flee. About 2,000 were able to escape to China in 2012. This flow was down by almost a third from the year before, but it is still a substantial number considering the terrible risks involved in trying to cross the border.

These defectors are now the sole voices that speak for the victimized and silenced people inside North Korea. The defectors’ networks, NGOs, and media operations in South Korea represent a two-way communications link for people inside North Korea. This is something that never existed before, and the defectors are a growing force in bringing the terrible human-rights abuses of the Kim regime to the world’s attention. Still, as Harden notes, their voices have been relatively muted, and their reports “have barely pricked the world’s collective conscience” (12). This brings us to the importance of Shin Dong-hyuk.

As rights activist Suzanne Scholte told Harden, “Tibetans have the Dalai Lama . . . Burmese have Aung San Suu Kyi. . . . North Koreans have no one like that” (13). Shin does not have the stature of these lead-

ers, and *Escape from Camp 14* does not have the monumental and historic significance of Alexander Solzhenitsyn's *Gulag Archipelago*. But Shin's story has a special power because it is such an astonishing and devastating indictment of the North Korean gulag, and because it is now reaching a much wider audience than any previous research report on the camps or North Korean prison memoir.

Shin's prominence has placed on his shoulders the heavy responsibility of explaining the camps' full horror to the world in hopes of rescuing the perhaps as many as 200,000 people who remain captive in them. It did not seem likely when he arrived in South Korea that he would ever be able to bear such a responsibility. He endured great emotional suffering as he tried to recover from the terrible trauma that he had endured and the guilt that he felt over the deaths of his mother and brother.

According to Harden, though, Shin's psychological recovery and moral development have been extraordinary. *Escape from Camp 14* concludes with Harden observing Shin deliver a talk at a Korean Pentecostal church in Seattle. "Shin's speech astonished me," writes Harden:

Compared to the diffident, incoherent speaker I had seen six months earlier in Southern California, he was unrecognizable. He had harnessed his self-loathing and used it to indict the state that had poisoned his heart and killed his family. . . . When Shin was finished, when he told the congregation that one man, if he refuses to be silenced, could help free the tens of thousands who remain in North Korea's camps, the church exploded in applause. . . . Shin had seized control of his past (190–91).

Shin's personal development gives hope that the North Korean people have the capacity to recover from the terrible damage—which is intellectual and moral as well as physical and economic—that they have suffered from more than sixty years of life under the harshest form of totalitarianism ever devised. Harden reports that teenage defectors from North Korea are on average five inches shorter and 25 pounds lighter than their South Korean counterparts. He also notes that South Korea's economy is 38 times larger than the North's and that its international-trade volume is 224 times greater. It is no wonder, but no less inexcusable, that many South Koreans prefer to keep North Korea as it is rather than face the cost of rebuilding the country, which could dwarf what the West Germans had to pay to rebuild East Germany. Shin's personal story, in addition to revealing the horrors of the camps, may also reveal a capacity for revival that now seems unimaginable to most South Koreans.

The Most Terrible Possibility

But there is a more immediate problem to be faced, and that is not just exposing the conditions in the camps but preventing the extermination of the prisoners. A brief passage toward the end of the book has the

most ominous implications, but Harden, inexplicably, fails to discuss or explore them. He writes that he met with Shin soon after witnessing an angry fracas between South Koreans favoring engagement and a defector trying to send balloons bearing anti-Kim leaflets north over the Demilitarized Zone between the two Koreas. Shin, Harden writes, had no interest in such street confrontations. Rather, he was busy watching old films of the Allied liberation of Nazi death camps, “which included scenes of bulldozers unearthing corpses that Adolph Hitler’s collapsing Third Reich had tried to hide.” Shin told Harden that “it is just a matter of time” before North Korea decides to destroy the camps. “I hope the United States, through pressure and persuasion,” he continued, “can convince [the North Korean government] not to murder all those people in the camps” (175).

This is more than Shin’s imagination, fueled by his terrible memories, running wild. As more defector testimonies regarding the criminal atrocities taking place in the camps become available, and as satellite photography irrefutably reveals the camps’ locations and layouts for all to see, the North Korean government’s continued denial that the camps are real is becoming a growing international scandal.⁸ The failure of denial as a credible option raises the question of whether the regime will take steps to hide the camps by eliminating their inmates.

This possibility lends special urgency to a report (issued on 27 September 2012 by Radio Free Asia) that in Camp 22, one of the six active *kwan-li-so* concentration camps, “a large number of prisoners have starved to death since 2010” and “the North Korean authorities have been working in extreme secrecy to close the site since mid-March of last year.” The report quoted one source as saying, “Some guards from Camp 22 were left behind until the end of August to destroy all the traces of monitoring and detention facilities,” and added that the authorities are “organizing a new cooperative farm at the site” with people transferred from nearby collective farms. The website DailyNK reported the following day that “Camp 22 was totally shut down in June.”

When these reports came out, further investigation was immediately conducted by HRNK in cooperation with DigitalGlobe, a leading provider of high-resolution satellite images. Their own report confirmed that Camp 22 appeared to have been dismantled and its prisoners replaced by local farmers and laborers. Not surprisingly, researchers could not determine the fate of the prisoners, and further investigation is underway to determine if they might have been transferred to another camp. An update in December by HRNK noted that a second installation, Camp 18, may also have been shut down and emphasized that close monitoring is essential “to ensure that the North Korean regime does not attempt to erase all evidence of atrocities committed at the camps, including the surviving prisoners.”

This fuels worries that, as more becomes known about the camps, the

North Korean government may do exactly what Shin feared—murder the prisoners in order to eliminate the evidence of its crimes. Of course, we cannot know this for certain. But the regime has already given ample evidence that it places no value on the lives of its prisoners—Harden’s account of Shin Dong-hyuk’s experiences further attests to this—so the most horrific scenario cannot be ruled out.

Much more is known today about what is happening in North Korea than was known about the Nazi crimes during World War II, which the historian Walter Laqueur has called “the terrible secret.”⁹ And there is much stronger advocacy today, supported by information that is universally available on the Internet. There is no excuse for inaction. The issue needs to be raised in every international forum with an urgency equal to the scale of the evil that is being confronted. The message of this searing camp memoir, and of everything else that we have come to know about the North Korean dictatorship, is that there is no greater evil in the world today.

NOTES

1. Ralph Hassig and Kongdan Oh, *The Hidden People of North Korea: Everyday Life in the Hermit Kingdom* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2009), 27.

2. Citizens’ Alliance for North Korean Human Rights, “Report on the Visit to Prague by NKHR Delegation,” 7–13 September 2002, 4–5.

3. Václav Havel, “Time to Act on N. Korea,” *Washington Post*, 18 June 2004.

4. David Hawk, *The Hidden Gulag: The Lives and Voices of “Those Who Are Sent to the Mountains”—Exposing Crimes Against Humanity in North Korea’s Vast Prison System*, 2nd ed. (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Committee for Human Rights in North Korea, 2012)

5. Barbara Demick, *Nothing to Envy: Ordinary Lives in North Korea* (New York: Spiegel and Grau, 2009); Chol-hwan Kang and Pierre Rigoulot, *The Aquariums of Pyongyang: Ten Years in the North Korean Gulag* (New York: Basic, 2001).

6. Blaine Harden, *Escape from Camp 14: One Man’s Remarkable Odyssey from North Korea to Freedom in the West* (New York: Viking, 2012). All quotations from the book in this essay are cited by page numbers given in parentheses.

7. Andrei Lankov, “Changing North Korea: An Information Campaign Can Beat the Regime,” *Foreign Affairs* 88 (November–December 2009): 99.

8. In early 2013, the North Korean gulag drew added coverage as Google began showing the outlines of some of the camps on its popular online mapping site. See Evan Ramstad, “Google Fills in North Korea Map, from Subways to Gulags,” *Wall Street Journal*, 30 January 2013, A8. A Google Maps satellite image of Camp 14 may be seen at <https://maps.google.com/maps?ll=39.571086,126.055466&spn=0.01,0.01&t=h&q=39.571086,126.055466>.

9. Walter Laqueur, *The Terrible Secret: Suppression of the Truth About Hitler’s “Final Solution”* (New York: Henry Holt, 1980).