

Escape from Camp 14 Study Guide

Escape from Camp 14 by Blaine Harden

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Summary

“Escape from Camp 14” by Blaine Harden is the true story of Shin In Geun who was born and raised in a political prison camp in North Korea. Shin knew nothing of the outside world. He lived in small dormitory quarters with his mother who resented him and treated him with disdain. She left early each day to work in the fields. When she returned home for lunch, she would often find that Shin had eaten her lunch as well as his own. She would beat him for this transgression because she had to return to work in the field on an empty stomach. Shin didn’t mind the beatings because he liked the extra food. It was a matter of survival in the prison camps. He considered his mother as a competitor for food.

Children of the prison camps were required to attend school six days a week for ten hours each day. The prison camp schools were run by nameless teachers and guards, and the curriculum wasn’t a typical one. The children were taught nothing about geography. So, they did not know the countries that surrounded their own. They were also not taught North Korean history. Instead, they learned the benefits of snitching on each other and their parents, as well as working in the fields and the coal mines. They were taught how to be introspective and share their sins with the teachers so they could be beaten in front of the class.

At sixteen, Shin was moved away from his mother’s room to live in a dormitory with the other boys, all of whom were now workers. Snitching was encouraged, and punishments were handed out for violations or perceived violations. Punishments included beatings and torture and even death. Shin became upset at his mother for cooking rice for his older brother and giving him corn gruel. He overheard them discussing escape plans and turned them into the guards. His mother and brother were caught and stopped. Shin and his father had to watch his mother being hanged and his brother shot to death. Shin didn’t feel bad; he felt they deserved it for trying to escape.

After Shin was assigned to work on a pig farm, he felt he would live out his days on the farm. It wasn’t hard work and there was a lot of food he could steal. But, he was moved to a garment factory where he met a new arrival, a highly educated prisoner who befriended him and told him about the vast world and opportunities that existed outside the prison camp. Ultimately, the two planned to escape. Tragically, Shin’s friend was electrocuted while trying to climb over the fence. Miraculously, Shin survived the electric shock and was able to make it over the fence.

Shin embarked on an odyssey around China for the next year. He was always looking over his shoulder out of fear that he would be arrested. He finally made it to safety in South Korea where he was made a citizen. But, his transition to freedom was a difficult one. For twenty-three years he had focused on getting enough to eat. He didn’t know what to do with liberty. He eventually moved to the United States where he became part of a human rights organization.



Shin was haunted by the deaths of his mother and brother. He finally allowed himself to feel shame and guilt for his part in their executions. He was diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder. It took years for him to get to a better place. He met a young Korean American and formed his first close relationship with a woman. Now, the two are hoping to be a beacon of light for other North Korean defectors who struggle with the transition to normal life.



Chapters 1 - 3

Summary

Shin and his mother, Jang Hye Gyung, lived in Camp 14. They lived in what was considered the best quarters there. There were 40 buildings in the camp. Four families shared their facilities. Shin and his mother slept on the concrete floor in their room. Electricity was on only two hours a day. Heat came from a coal fire. The windows were opaque, impossible to see through. There was no furniture or running water. There was no shower or bath. In the summer, people would sneak down to the river if they wanted to bathe.

Jang made her work quota, so she could bring home food for that evening and the next day. She made meals for Shin before she left for work. Each meal was the same – corn porridge, pickled cabbage and cabbage soup. This was the same meal Shin ate every day for twenty-three years. When he was young, Jang left him alone in their room. He ate his lunch and her lunch. She'd beat him when she returned from the field to find she had no lunch to eat. In the camp, Jang was his competition for food, for survival. He ate as much as he could and took the beatings.

Shin knew little about his mother's background. She was forced into a "reward marriage" with a man selected by the guards. Sex without permission resulted in death. His father, Shin Gyung Sub, told Shin the guards gave him Jang as payment for his skill as a lathe operator. Jang's status was slightly improved after she married. After a five day "honeymoon" when they could sleep together, they only saw each other a few times a year. They had two sons Shin and his older brother He Geun. Shin barely knew his brother who was eight years older. His brother was moved to a dormitory when Shin was four. Shin had no relationship with his father. The guards and teachers had the most influence on the lives and thinking of the children.

Those in the prison camps had no idea that their fellow countrymen were dying of starvation and that the government was having difficulty feeding the army. They also didn't know that many North Koreans were walking to China hoping to flee the country. Slave workers grew vegetables, farmed fish, and made products for the North Koreans who were not incarcerated in the prison camps.

As he matured, Shin stayed at a dormitory and slept on concrete floors where he shivered all night. One boy took off for a while to find something to eat. When he returned, the other boys were ordered to tie him to a tree and beat him. Guards were part of the elite class, but they were isolated most of their lives in prison camps. Most of the elite class lived in apartments or single family homes in gated communities in Pyongyang. It is estimated that out of the 23 million North Koreans there were only several hundred thousand considered elite. A small number of the elite were allowed outside the country to serve as diplomats or government representatives. Some were reportedly involved in criminal activities such as counterfeiting, cyber terrorism and drug



trafficking and funneled money to Pyongyang. Some individuals were involved in reinsurance scams.

Elites had good sized apartments and access to rice and luxury items such as fruit and liquor. Still there were interruptions in electricity and a lack of hot water. The elites did not live as well as middle-class families in Seoul. The Kim family dynasty however lived like kings. The family had eight country homes equipped with movie theaters, indoor pools, basketball courts, and shooting ranges. Several had horse-racing tracks, private train stations, and water parks. There were organic orchards and a large family yacht. Kim Jong Il inherited control of North Korea from his father in 1994. In December 2011, Kim Jong Eun took the reins when his father died. Kim Jong Eun was declared to be the “supreme leader” who was “the spiritual pillar and lighthouse of hope” for the people. He was also described as a “genius of the literary arts.” He was the spitting image of his grandfather, Kim Il Sung who was more popular than Kim Jong Il.

The ascension to power by Kim Jong Eun marked a sea change at least as far as the supreme leader was concerned. He was the first leader to be seen with his wife and children. He began to relax regulations on attire by allowing women to wear pants at public events. He seemed to be less interested in the overwhelming power of the military. There were signs that he was inching away from a Communist hard line. However, he surprised the world with the launch of a three-stage rocket that placed a satellite in orbit. It was a message that North Korea could strike anywhere including on United States soil with a nuclear payload. In June 2012, the UN reported that an estimated two-thirds of North Korea’s population was starving.

Analysis

The author tells of the early days of Shin’s life in Camp 14, a political prison camp in Communist North Korea. The author wants to frame his story with the early days of Shin’s prison life so that the reader has understanding of his environment and the dynamics between Shin and family members who are also incarcerated. The author emphasizes that the priority of the prisoners, including the children, was finding enough food to survive. The harsh, isolated life that Shin was forced to live is a human tragedy that informs the reader of an existence that is far from normal . The information included is educational and interesting, especially to those who are curious about life under Communist rule.

Vocabulary

Opaque, mandatory, retrospect, propitious, traitorous, inherent, incurious, berated, pellagra, conscript, desultory, iniquitous, draconian, provoking, hinterlands, seismic.



Chapters 4 - 6

Summary

On April 6, 1996, Shin was handcuffed and blindfolded by three soldiers and placed in the back of a vehicle. He was taken to an underground prison within the camp. He was taken to a windowless room where he was interrogated by a military commander. That morning his mother and brother had tried to escape. Shin assured the officer that he hadn't known anything about it. The officer didn't believe him.

This was the account that Shin told repeatedly when he made it to South Korea in 2006. Every defector from North Korea was thoroughly debriefed in South Korea. Shin then related his story to counselors and human rights activists and to the media. Shin told the same story to the author when they met in Seoul in 2008. There was no one to confirm his account. His mother and brother were dead by then, and his father was still in the camp or dead, too. However, the story seemed credible to experts.

Shin and the author met up again in Torrance, California, a year later. Shin revised his story. They were joined by Hannah Song who was the executive director of Liberty in North Korea, a human rights group that helped bring Shin to the United States. Shin admitted that he had fabricated the story about his mother's escape. He had lied because he didn't want people to think badly of him. He now felt it was his moral duty to be honest. Shin was close to the guards and spied for them. He'd never been able to forgive himself for his actions. He felt he could be redeemed if people on the outside understood the psychological damage that the prison camp did to kids up grew up there.

Shin's new version of events began on April 5, 1996, one day earlier than his first account. His teacher gave him the night off. He didn't have to stay in the dorm; he could eat dinner with his mother. He wasn't thrilled because their relationship had not improved over the years. He didn't trust her. When he returned home, his brother, He Geun, was there. He knew little about his brother other than he wasn't a hard worker. His mother was not happy to see Shin.

Shin's mother fed him gruel for dinner. Later, he saw that his mother made rice for He Geun which was an insult. Rice was the revered food of North Korea. He figured that his mother had stolen the rice. Shin spied on his mother and brother. He heard his brother say that he didn't have permission to leave the cement factory where he worked. Apparently, he had done something wrong. He Geun decided to escape and his mother was going to help him. If he were caught, he would be killed. Shin feared he would be implicated in the plot.

Shin ran back to the dormitory and woke his friend Hong Sung Jo who ran with him to the night guard. He bargained with the guard. For the information he was about to tell him, he wanted a guarantee of more food and that he be named leader in his grade at



school. Such a position would excuse him from some work and beatings would be less frequent. The guard assured him that his demands would be met. Shin told the guard about his brother and mother's escape plot. The next morning, he was handcuffed, blindfolded and taken to the underground prison.

Shin's interrogator told him that his mother and brother had been caught trying to escape. The officer demanded to know if Shin knew about the plan. He apparently didn't know that it was Shin who tipped the guards off. The night guard claimed credit for stopping the escape. Shin was thrown into a small cell and repeatedly interrogated. On the third day, he was hung upside down from the cell's ceiling. He was taken to what appeared to be a torture room replete with clubs, axes, hooks, and pliers. He was told to tell the truth, or he would be killed. After he insisted he didn't know anything, he was stripped, hung from the ceiling, and lowered into a tub of hot coals. As he tried to twist away from the heat, one of the men gouged him in the abdomen with a gaff hook. Shin lost consciousness.

Shin woke in his cell. He was left alone for two days, barely able to crawl around in the small space. Some small amounts of food had been left on the floor for him. He felt nauseous as his burns became infected. On the tenth day in prison, he was interrogated again. He finally told them that it was he who had reported his mother and brother. He told them that Hong Sung Jo had gone with him and could verify his account. A few days later, Shin was transferred to another cell. The night guard was never seen again.

Analysis

This section is one of the most dramatic and tragic of the entire story. Shin, a true innocent, had been exposed to nothing but misery his entire life. He had been conditioned and brainwashed that the children of prisoners had been arrested and incarcerated because of the sins of their fathers. The only way to wash these sins away was to work hard and cooperate. One way to cooperate was to snitch on other prisoners for violating rules. Shin, upset with his mother and brother, turned them in for planning an escape. A short while later, his mother and brother were arrested and executed. Shin was forced to watch the executions. He felt nothing at the time but the entire incident later proved to be the most devastating experience of Shin's life. The author focuses on this episode because later, after his escape, Shin suffered from overwhelming shame and guilt from which he may recover. While the reader probably will not relate directly to the incident, they will have empathy for the young man and understand how he must feel.

Vocabulary

Incredulous, expiate, gruel, coherent, interrogator, covet, spawn, bracken.



Chapters 7 - 9

Summary

Shin had a 50 year-old cell mate who had been incarcerated there for many years. His name was Kim Jin Myung. He asked Shin to call him "Uncle." Shin continued to suffer from the burns and infection from his torture for several more weeks. Shin curled up on the floor to die. Then, Uncle began tending to him, and Shin recovered. Uncle was the first person to show Shin real kindness and caring; Shin was grateful for it. Uncle knew the history of North Korea and told Shin a lot of stories which Shin began to savor. At one point the guards tried to cajole Shin into spying on Uncle and getting him to say something that they could hold against him. But, Shin liked the old man's stories and didn't want to lose him. Uncle assured Shin that they both would one day be free. Shin remained silent. He didn't believe it.

One day Shin was given his school uniform to put on. It was time for him to leave the underground prison. He didn't want to go because he loved Uncle, the only person who'd ever cared about him. And those stories he told about the outside world were what Shin cherished above all. Uncle embraced him and told him they'd be together again on the outside. Shin never saw him again.

Shin had been in the underground prison for more than six months. He was taken to the large interrogation room where he saw his father on his knees before two interrogators. He had been tortured; his leg was broken below the knee. Father and son had affixed their thumbprints to a non-disclosure document. They swore not to reveal anything they had observed in the underground prison. They were driven to an open area where executions took place. A temporary gallows had been erected. Shin thought they were being executed. However, the guards were dragging his mother and brother. He and his father had to watch them being hanged.

Shin dealt with the execution of his mother and brother for years. He hadn't felt like that on the days of the hangings. He was angry and hated them. They had brought misery onto themselves and onto Shin and his father. When he mother was about to be hanged, she looked directly at Shin. He diverted his eyes. His brother was shot to death by a firing squad.

Shin returned to school at Camp 14. The headmaster was angry with him because Shin had not come to him first with the betrayal by his mother and brother. The headmaster could have taken credit for stopping the escape. The headmaster punished him in front of the class. Shin had to work on the camp farm which caused his burns and wounds to rupture and again bleed profusely. The kids he'd known for years began to bully him. Hong Joo Hyun was the class leader who led students in their work and was allowed to hit or kick those who did not obey. The adult version of class leader was "jagubbanjang" or crew manager. Crew managers were especially brutal. Hong struck Shin with a shovel and kicked him when he had overloaded a stone cart. He hit him in the face with



the shovel when he tried to stand up. Shin was frail and weak from his time in the underground prison. He was constantly looking for food to gain strength. Hong turned him in for eating a dried up ear of corn when he was supposed to be working. His punishment was to take slaps from all the girls and boys in the class.

Shin's time with Uncle and his stories had opened up his mind to the outside world. He was dismayed by the horrid life he had in the prison and was lonely and depressed. At that point, he blamed his mother for the abuse he'd been made to suffer. He was angry with his father and refused to speak to him on his visits.

The prospect of suicide was always looming. It was an alternative to hunger, overwork, and beatings. The appeal of suicide was overwhelming for some. For Shin, he felt fortunate that he had been born in a prison camp because he didn't have a life outside the camp for comparison. It was usually the imprisoned outsiders who were vulnerable to suicide because they had led better lives before being incarcerated.

A short time after Shin returned to school, a new teacher was assigned. For some unknown reason, he saw to it that Shin got as much food as he wanted and gave him less labor-intensive tasks. He protected him from abuse by the other students. Shin's burn wounds finally healed and he put on some weight. Shin is certain he would have died without the help of this teacher.

Analysis

With this section, the author is slowly building Shin's story to his escape and defection. Uncle, his cell mate, enlightens Shin about the outside world and urges Shin to make it a goal to be free one day. Since Shin knew nothing of the outside world, Uncle's stories stunned and fascinated the young boy. The author describes the close relationship between Shin and Uncle to demonstrate that Shin is capable of loving and being loved. Uncle was the only person who ever seemed to care about Shin or be kind to him. The reader will note that the spark of curiosity has been planted in Shin and thoughts of escape were perhaps not far away. The reader will be rooting for Shin to find himself in the horror and chaos of his life and strike out into the world.

Vocabulary

Pallid, atrophy, configured, caustic, gallows, shirk, vigilant, abasement, arduous.



Chapter 10 - 12

Summary

In 1998, Shin was fifteen and working alongside thousands of prisoners to build a hydroelectric dam on the Taedong River. It was hard labor so the workers were fed well. One day Shin saw that a high concrete wall that had just been finished was collapsing. He called out to warn those working underneath it. But, it was too late. All the workers perished under the weight of the wall. Shin and other workers were instructed to remove their bodies at the end of the shift.

Work on the construction of hydroelectric plants was conducted around the clock. Shin had observed people dying on the job from hunger, overwork, and abuse. A flash flood took hundreds of workers into the river to drown. Despite these events, Shin liked the work and the surplus of food. Those were the best years of his life. He became strong and confident and gained a sense of independence.

At sixteen Shin was assigned a long-term job in the coal mines which was tantamount to a death sentence. Later, without any explanation, he was given a permanent job at the camp's pig farm. Shin didn't work hard on the pig farm and was beaten only infrequently and not "to death." By taking advantage of the corn thrown about on the ground for the pigs, he ate better. Shin slept in the men's dormitory. The workers were not allowed to eat the meat of slaughtered pigs and other farm animals, but they sometimes stole it. He led a relatively bearable life from 1999 to 2003 on the pig farm.

The green sprouts of capitalism that dotted the country weakened the government's grip on the lives of the people. The administration confiscated a fair amount of privately grown food for the army. Shin, like other workers in prison camps, fared better during the famine because of the availability of food. He knew nothing of the country's changing economy. His focus was on stealing food to survive. At twenty years of age, he assumed he would live the rest of his life on the pig farm. His thoughts of the future were abruptly changed in March 2003 when he was transferred to a garment factory. Life became more chaotic again with quotas and pressures to snitch on co-workers. It was at the garment factory that Shin met an educated prisoner from Pyongyang who would enlighten him about possibilities.

Shin was no longer weak and retiring. He made his "bones" by standing up to a bully who punched one of the girls in Shin's group. Shin struck him with a wrench and sent him to the floor. The bully never bothered anyone again when Shin was around. The only Bowiwon at the factory was the superintendent. The rest of the thousands of workers there were prisoners. Attractive women working on the floor caused sexual tension with the men including Shin. He had to remember that unapproved sex meant death. That law didn't apply to the superintendent and his pet supervisors who took advantage of the young women. The girls were given extra food and less work besides



they had no choice but to cooperate. One girl who was a favorite of the superintendent disappeared after she became pregnant.

Shin accidentally dropped a large sewing machine that he was carrying to the shop to repair. As punishment his middle finger was cut off above the joint with a big butcher knife. No anesthesia was used. His father heard of his injury and sent him a container of rice as a get well gift. Shin still held great resentment for his father. So, despite his hunger, Shin refused to eat it.

Shin was snitched on by his co-worker Kang for stealing vegetables from one of the gardens. He was whacked by the superintendent who cut his food rations in half for two weeks. In return, Shin turned in Kang for stealing fabric. Kang was chained and beaten for his infraction.

Analysis

The author describes a slight shift to the left within Communist North Korea. There are green sprouts of democracy and capitalism popping up throughout the country. The development of private markets was driven by starvation. The author also depicts the erstwhile weak and retiring Shin developing into a strong young man who stands up for what he believes in. Since there was little to believe in in Camp 14, the hint is that he is ready to flee to a place where he can truly come of his own. The reader will enjoy the change that Shin is going through especially knowing that he ultimately escapes. It is also gratifying for the Western reader to see that Communism is failing miserably and that Capitalism is coming to the rescue.

Vocabulary

Hydroelectric, beguiling, stamina, rationale, purloin, vagabond, mitigated, lucrative, whet.



Chapter 13 - 15

Summary

The superintendent ordered Shin to spy on Park Yong Chul. He was an important new prisoner who had lived abroad and had a well-connected wife. Shin was tasked with teaching Park how to repair sewing machines. Shin and Park began spending a lot of time together. It was obvious that Park was well-educated and sophisticated; however, he was not condescending toward his younger and uneducated teacher. Initially, Park didn't trust Shin enough to tell him about himself. However, it was only a short while after Shin began training Park that he began to reveal things about his past.

Park also enlightened Shin about the huge and diverse world that existed outside of the prison and the opportunities that existed for everyone. Park had to explain to Shin the concept of money, TVs, computers and mobile phones to Shin – all things that had never been part of Shin's world. What Shin enjoyed most were stories about food. It made him recall Uncle telling him to think about being free. Like his time with Uncle, Park taught Shin to dream of more. He decided not to snitch on Park. He didn't want the stories to stop.

Park had lost his position as head of taekwondo training in Pyongyang in 2002. He and his wife fled to China where they stayed 18 months. They intended to return to Pyongyang where their teenaged child was staying with grandparents. While in China, Park followed the coverage on Hwang Jang Yop who had fled North Korea and was a huge critic of Kim Jong Il. Park, his wife and newborn baby son returned to North Korea in 2003. They were detained at the border, arrested and sent to prison in Camp 14. Currently, his wife was trying to divorce him and convince authorities that her husband was a political criminal and she had just been his submissive wife.

After several prisoners suddenly went missing, Shin had had enough. He thought about escaping. Park had given him a way to dream about a different future.

The plan was simple: Shin would get them over the fence and Park would get them to China. He naturally had apprehensions about broaching the subject of escape with Park because everyone snitched on everyone. But he decided to take the risk and although he knew Park could be an informant, Shin discussed the subject of escape with him. They both knew that the odds were against them. No one had ever escaped from Camp 14 and only two individuals had escaped from any of the North Korean prison camps. Shin feared getting caught and shot or being electrocuted on the fence but he had made his decision. He wanted to see that world that Uncle and Park had told him about. In preparation for the escape, he stole warm clothes and new shoes from another prisoner.

Their chance came on New Year's Day when his crew would be sent to a mountain ridge to trim trees and stack wood. Shin knew that there was a fence to the outside in that area. Park agreed that they would escape on January 2, 2005. Even though Shin



still resented his father he had a last meal with him but did not reveal his escape plans. He could not afford to even trust his own father under the circumstances. If the guards found out about his escape plans, he would be executed just like his mother and brother.

Shin, Park and twenty-five other prisoners were herded up the mountainside. Shin and Park were on the firewood detail which placed them near the fence. Shin noticed that there were lengthy intervals between guard patrols which would give them time to escape unnoticed. They waited until dusk when visibility would be at its worse. They inched toward the fence trimming trees as they moved toward freedom. The fence was ten feet high with strands of high-voltage barbed wire spaced a foot apart on top of it.

Park got cold feet; he didn't think he could carry out their plans. But Shin knew it was their only chance. He grabbed Park's hand and ran as fast as he could to the fence. As Park tried to scale the wall, he was electrocuted. His body fell to the ground. Shin used Park's body to elevate himself. Shin received a shock that severely burned his leg from ankles from knees. A combination of his extra clothing and Park's dead body taking the brunt of the shock probably helped shield him from a worse jolt and saved his life.

Shin ran down the mountainside after clearing the fence. He felt the blood run down his legs and suffered from harrowing pain from the burns. But he couldn't stop. There was no one to help him. His only chance was that he kept going. He ran through a wooded area that opened up onto fields and pastures. He didn't stop running for two hours. He had no idea where China was.

Analysis

The author depicts Shin's sudden transfer to the garment factory as destiny knocking at Shin's door. Unlike the pig farm, the environment in the garment factory was chaotic and combative even among the prisoners. His dissatisfaction with this assignment is another step toward escape. He is thrown back into the suspicious and untrusting environment where everyone snitches on everyone else. Although the guards urge him to, he does not spy on Park. Park underscores the promises of the outside world to Shin which compels him to plan his escape. The reader will be cheering for Shin and recognize that Shin is on the doorstep of real change.

Vocabulary

Honorific, linguistic, trajectory, gustatory, seditious, paranoia, meager.



Chapter 16 - 18

Summary

Shin found shelter in a farmer's shed. There were ears of corn in side which he devoured. He found an old uniform to replace his bloody and torn prison pants. His legs from the knees down were sticky with blood from the shock. Wearing the uniform he no longer looked like a prisoner. By that evening he had traveled six miles to Bukchange, a coal mining town. He stayed in a pigpen for the night. He was exhausted and hungry and in pain but being free exhilarated him. He was in shock to see fellow North Koreans walk about freely with no presence of guards. His world for twenty-three years had been in a prison camp. Shin felt free and no one seemed to be looking for him. He broke into a house and stole food, clothing and shoes. A market lady bought a large bag of rice from him for four thousand won. Park had told him about money but didn't know if the price was a fair one. He decided to sell the rice and got what was the equivalent of \$4 which he used to buy crackers and cookies. Shin fell in with a group of traders who were looking for food and work.

Unknown to Shin when he crawled over the fence, there was an established human smuggling network. For \$2,000 a defector could embark on a long trek through Asia to Seoul. There were more expensive escape plans. Anyone caught by the government smuggling defectors would be executed. Shin didn't have the money or contacts to be smuggled out. He lived in the shadows finding places to stay and tips on stealing food and other items.

Shin lived in fear that he would be caught and executed. He learned from the traders that a truck would take him from the small village of Maengsan to the train station in Hamhung, North Korean's second most populated city. Luckily, travel permits were not required any longer. The truck was probably a converted military truck. In North Korea, vehicles were owned by the government, not by private individuals. Security officials at camps incarcerated captured traders and kept them until they shared some of their profits.

Shin arrived in Hamhung at night. Hamhung was a coastal city with a population of a million. Most people worked in factories. The city had been hit hard with the famine due to a poor distribution process. Ten percent of the city's population died of starvation and ten percent had fled the city in search of food. Shin followed the other traders to the train and climbed in the boxcar behind them. They headed for Chongjin which led to the Chinese border. Shin was invited to stay overnight at the home of a young trader in Gilju where he could have a good meal and a warm place to sleep. As it turned out his new "friend" made off with Shin's warm coat and was never seen again.

For the next three weeks, Shin wandered aimlessly around Gilju with no coat, no money and no contacts. He eventually joined a gang of teenage boys who hung out at the train station where they begged or money and stole food. The boys knew of several farms



where they could go to dig up daikons (radishes) that they could sell at the market. There were photos of Kim Jon Il everywhere, a constant reminder of their cruel dictator. The walls had ears and there were always snitches. No one said a disparaging word about the leader. They were afraid to.

Shin's problem remained finding enough food to survive. Escaping to China was a priority but if he starved he would never get there. The food situation in Gilju in January 2005 was dire. He made money selling stolen daikon to market women which he would use for food. One day, Shin broken into a vacant house where he found winter clothes and a fifteen bag of rice. He was paid \$6 for the rice and decided to take a train north.

The Tumen River that borders China and North Korea ices over in the winter and can be crossed on foot. Shin gave some crackers to an appreciative old homeless man. He told Shin to give the border guards cigarettes and food as bribes that would enable him to pass safely through the border. North Korean guards had become more lax on the Chinese border due to the food shortage. The porous Chinese border was providing the North Koreans with food and warm winter coats and bringing the country into the 21st century with the influx of electronic devices and other modern products. Finally, Shin crossed the frozen river and as he took his first step on the bank turned around and looked at North Korea for the last time in his life.

Analysis

The author describes Shin's difficult transition to the outside world. Ironically, his number one priority outside the prison is the same as it was inside the prison – finding enough food to survive. His travels all over North Korea and finally to China add a measure of adventure and finally hope that Shin will have the chance at living a real life. The dramatic depiction of Shin looking back at North Korea as he steps onto Chinese soil is a symbol of leaving his past behind him forever. The reader can relate to the profound feeling which a young man unfairly imprisoned his entire life must have at finally achieving his freedom.

Vocabulary

Temerity, rucksack, draconian, permeability, insurgent, marauding, catastrophic.



Chapter 19 - 20

Summary

Once in China, Shin didn't know where to go; his main goal was to get as far away from the border as possible. He heard from the traders that he might be able to find work and a place to stay. He pleaded with several people to give him food and shelter but was rejected. He was able to start a campfire with the dying embers of a pit fire. He slept in the forest that night. Shin walked the next day avoiding police checkpoints along the way. Late that night a farmer invited him in for a meal and a place to stay. The man hired him to tend to his pigs. He stayed there a month and had plenty to eat. He was able to take a bath and use soap and get rid of the lice he had all his life. The farmer got him antibiotics for his burns and gave him winter boots and a coat. After a month, the farmer told Shin it was time for him to move on. He offered to drive him to a mountain top farm where he could get work tending to livestock.

Shin kept the job on the ranch for the next ten months. Shin's legs healed, and he learned some Chinese. For the first time in his life he had access to a radio. He listened to news and discussions that sharply criticized North Korea and the Kim Dynasty. Reporters who had gone undercover and brought back snippets of real life in North Korea through video tapes and sound-bites revolutionized the coverage of North Korea. The penalty for listening to these stations in North Korea was ten years in hard labor. Many North Koreans were inspired to escape after listening to this coverage. Shin liked to listen to the broadcasts because they were in his language. He perked up when there was news about defectors or border crossings. Most of what he heard about the government and leaders was all new to him.

In late 2005, Shin decided to move on. His plan was to put distance between himself and the border guards and then seek out friendly Koreans in southern China in hopes of getting a job. As he traveled, he was relieved that no one seemed to think of him as a North Korean on the run. The pig farmer drove him to the bus station in Helong where he would begin his trek to southwest China. He sought help in churches along the way none of which offered him shelter but he was given money. He never revealed that he had escaped from a prison in fear of being turned in. He made it to Beijing where he was unable to find work but was given free meals by some restaurant owners.

On February 6, 2006, Shin arrived in Hangzhou where he found a job as a busboy in a Korean restaurant. After a few weeks, he quit his job and headed for Shanghai. He met a man who was a journalist in a Korean restaurant who questioned him about his past and asked if he wanted to go to South Korea. The journalist took Shin in a cab to the South Korean Consulate. The journalist told him it could be dangerous. China was trying to stop the wave of North Koreans trying to seek asylum. The journalist escorted Shin safely inside the consulate. It was difficult for him to believe that he was in safe hands despite the assurances of the consulate staff. He was given shelter, good, new clothes and was able to take daily showers for the first time in his life.



After six months at the consulate, he was flown to Seoul where he was interrogated by South Korean Intelligence for two weeks. They took a special interest in Shin and he tried to tell them every detail he could remember about Camp 14. US Intelligence interviewed him after the South Korean's had finished their interrogations. The only bit of information that he withheld from both South Korea and US agents was snitching on his mother. Shin was mesmerized by the sergeant who interviewed him. He had never before been in the presence of a white person. The sergeant's report was met with great interest by United States Intelligence.

Analysis

In this section, Shin is inching toward a normal life. He has difficulty finding work, but his perseverance finally pays off. But transition to freedom is a struggle for him. He is adjusting to being watch, controlled and monitored every hour of the day to having all 24 hours to use as he chooses. But he is still struggling with basic survival and exactly what he will do with those 24 hours and with the rest of his life. The reader is reminded of Shin's isolated life when he is mesmerized by the United States intelligence officer who interviews him. He had never before seen a white person.

Vocabulary

Albeit, venerates, consulate, asylum, garnered.

Chapter 21 - 23

Summary

After his debriefings, Shin reported to Hanawon or “House of Unity,” a government run resettlement center. The center was staffed with a medical staff, psychologists, counselors and teachers in a wide range of subjects. After defectors learn their rights, they are sent on field trips to shopping centers, banks and subway stations, a kind of hands-on training. Shin was given certification of his South Korean citizenship. He was also offered a free apartment, an eight-hundred monthly stipend for two years, and as much as \$18,000 if he saw the transition through successfully. It was during his stay in Hanawon that he began to have nightmares about his mother and became very depressed.

The doctors at Hanawon determined that Shin’s mental condition was deteriorating and had him transferred to a psychiatric ward at a nearby hospital. He was treated there for two months. He was diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder. After his released he moved into a small apartment that was provided for him in Hwaseong in the central Korean Peninsula. It took him a while to venture outside. He had difficulty finding a job and keeping it. His behavior was typical of long-time prisoners and defectors.

Shin was lonely. He tried to find an old uncle but only had a name that led him nowhere. Shin had been keeping a diary since his days in Shanghai. A counselor encouraged him to turn his diary into a memoir which was published in Korean in 2007. Human rights activists became interested in his story. His story was vetted by former prisoners and guards as well as lawyers and journalists. He and his story were convincing and he became known as the first North Korean to come south after escaping from a political prison. His story was considered sound by experts, human rights advocates and scholars. Shin started going to church although the concept of a forgiving god escaped him. He never asked questions or asked for help. His conditioning for twenty-three years in the prison camp prevented him from doing so. He knew he had to change, but change was difficult.

When Shin turned twenty-six in Seoul, his friends threw a surprise birthday party for him. His birthday had never been celebrated before. Seoul was not generally happy in Seoul. He quit his job and was running out of funds. He might have to join the homeless. He had no girlfriend or best friend. He was a solitary figure. His memoir only sold 500 copies and he had earned no money from the sales. He came to believe that South Korea really didn’t care about North Korea or its people. Shin and other defectors felt that South Koreans looked down on them as uneducated country bumpkins. He was at least partially correct. South Korea only seemed to pay attention to the south when something catastrophic happened like in 2010 when North Korean launched a sneak submarine attack on South Korean sailors killing 46 when their warship, the Cheonan, sank.

When Blaine Harden first met Shin he told him that North Korea would one day destroy its prison camps. He hoped that the United States could convince them to do so. He had decided he wanted to become a human rights activist and bring awareness to the camps. He intended to leave South Korea and move to Southern California.

Shin spoke to a group of Korean American teenagers at the Torrance First Presbyterian Church in Southern California. He spoke of his life in Camp 14. He was sponsored by a nonprofit named LINK (Liberty in North Korea). The organization hoped that he would be a dynamic force in shedding light on the atrocities in North Korea. It was difficult for him to speak about his escape and other aspects of his early life. He told Harden that he didn't think anyone would be able to relate to his experience. Nightmares about his mother still haunted him. He felt there was a "dead space" inside that kept him from feeling.

Shin's adaptation to life in the US wasn't any easier than his transition in South Korea. He couldn't enjoy life knowing that so many people are still suffering in the camps. In many ways, he was still a prisoner. He found it hard to trust others. Constructive criticism was taken as betrayal. An American pastor and his wife paid special attention to Shin who found their welcoming nature overwhelming. After two years he allowed himself to feel part of their family. He progressed and became more personable even allowing people to hug him. He began to give credit to God for allowing him to escape. He could not shake the guilt and shame he felt about his mother.

Shin continued to work with LINK who supported him with free housing and a stipend. The only work he did was chores around the LINK office. He traveled to South Korea twice a year. He was looking for a purpose, why he survived the camp. Southern California was good for Shin in that there were more than 300,000 Koreans residing in the Los Angeles area. He lived in cramped quarters with other LINK associates and volunteers. His existence was chaotic and dormitory-like. It suited him since it was reminiscent of his early life.

During Shin's second summer in California, Harim Lee, an attractive young woman joined the volunteer staff at LINK. She had been born in Seoul but moved to the US when she was four. She had heard of Shin and considered him a celebrity. There was an immediate attraction. There was a no-dating rule at LINK but they ignored it. Shin ultimately quit LINK. It was partly due to his relationship with Harim. However, there was dissatisfaction about Shin's attitude by Hannah Song, LINK's director.

Shin moved in with Harim and her parents in Seattle. They formed an NGO called North Korea Freedom Plexus with a goal of opening shelters for defectors who crossed into China. Harden kept in contact with Shin as they worked toward completing the book. Shin invited Harden to a speech he was giving at a church. He was amazed at Shin's speech. He was open and honest about his past but his words were free of guilt and shame. He had finally reined in his anger and pain and grabbed control of his past. Any reins on his future were still to be determined.



Analysis

Shin's experiences both in Seoul and the United States are described as mainly positive; but, he's having difficulty with adjusting. He has nightmares from his days of incarceration. He is dealing with old demons that won't go away, especially his involvement in his mother's and brother's executions. Shin slowly learns to trust and open himself up to people. He finds love for the first time in his life with a young Korean American. The story ends in hope for Shin's future. His decision to become a human rights activist and work with North Korean defectors. It is the perfect career for Shin because he will know exactly how they feel and what they've been through.

Vocabulary

Verdant, stipend, paranoia, prodigy, solicitous, atrocities, quagmire, belligerence, camaraderie.



Important People

Shin In Geun

Shin In Geun was born and raised in Camp 14, a North Korean prison camp. Until his escape at age twenty-three, he knew nothing other than the life he was forced to lead in the oppressive, brutal, and inhumane political prison camp. The first supreme leader of North Korea, Kim Il Sung, created the prison camps believing that wrongdoers passed their “criminal mind” on their descendants. It was Shin’s bad luck was the government’s contention that a remote relative who had committed a crime passed evil down to Shin and his family.

Shin knew nothing of the outside world. In fact, he didn’t even know there was a South Korea. Like all children, Shin was required to attend the prison camp school where nameless teachers fed them propaganda and reinforced the idea that they were bearing the sins of the father and that the only way to wash this evil away was to work as hard as they could. Homework usually focused on recollecting sins they had committed and telling them before the class the next day. After such a “confession” the teacher would direct all the students to slap the evil one. Shin had his share of slaps but like the other children believed he deserved it.

Shin was not close to his mother, father or brother. In fact, he barely ever saw his father and older brother who were away working in the fields or coal mines. On one occasion, Shin’s brother came home and he heard him and his mother plotting to escape. Like a good North Korean prisoner, he told the guards about the plot. His mother and brother were arrested and executed. Shin and his father were forced to watch his mother hang and his brother shot to death. Shin felt no guilt at the time because he felt they deserved their fate. Later has he matured, he would suffer from unending guilt.

At the age of twenty-three, Shin and another prisoner named Park plotted to escape from the camp. Shin was able to make it over the electric fence with only a minor shock but Park was electrocuted and died as he tried to scale the fence. Shin made it across to China where he wandered for the next year. He finally made it to Seoul and then onto the United States. He left the US after a few years and returned to South Korea to do work as a human rights activist. After twenty-three years of incarceration it was not surprising that he struggled with his new-found independence. In later references, Shin is referred to as Shin Dong-hyuk which is the new name he chose after arriving in Seoul.

Park Yong Chul

Park Yong Chul was a newly arriving prisoner in Camp 14 who was teamed up with Shin at the garment factory. Shin was instructed by the guards to teach Park how to repair sewing machines and to try to extract information about Park’s past and relay it to them.



Park was an older man who was obviously well-educated and sophisticated. He had lived abroad and had been the director of taekwondo in Pyongyang. He was married to a politically connected woman. He knew people high up in the North Korean government.

Park had grown up in a large apartment in Pyongyang and had been educated in East Germany and The Soviet Union and was made chief of the taekwondo training center in Pyongyang after completing his education. He told Shin about another Korea – South Korea – which Shin had never heard of. He didn't know what money was or TVs or computers. Park enlightened Shin about the outside world and the opportunities that existed there. Shin loved Park's stories especially when they involved food. Park had gotten into trouble when he lost his position as chief of taekwondo training. He and his wife left North Korea and stayed with relatives in China for eighteen months. When they returned, they were arrested for defecting.

Shin and Park made plans to escape from the prison camp. When they were tasked with gathering firewood, they waited for the guards to pass by and ran to the fence that led to China. Park started to scale the fence first but was electrocuted. Shin was able to withstand a shock from the fence and made it over. Park was dead but he had been the inspiration for Shin's escape.

Jang Hye Gyung

Jang Hye Gyung was Shin's mother. Shin lived with his mother in a room in prison camp housing. His mother worked from dawn to dusk and came home to Shin with little food to make dinner with. Life in the camp was in one word: survival. As Shin matured and was hungry all the time, he would often eat the lunches that his mother made for him and for herself. She would beat him for eating her food and have to return to the field to work the rest of the day with a completely empty stomach.

Mother and son were not close. Jang had been forced into a marriage with Shin's father, and there was nothing traditional about any of their relationships. Their lives were too dire and hopeless to concentrate on their feelings or interactions with one another. They were focused on finding enough food to survive.

Shin overheard his mother and brother plotting to escape. Shin was angry because Jang had made rice for his older brother and gave him gruel. He turned his mother and brother into the guards for plotting to escape. They were both executed; Shin and his father were forced to watch the executions.

Shin Gyung Sub

Shin Gyung Sub was Shin's father told Shin that he married his mother as payment from the guards for his good work as a lathe operator. He had only five nights with his bride on their "honeymoon." Thereafter, Sub was home only a few times a year. Shin had only a distant relationship with his father. In later years, he resented his father for



his lot in life. When Shin was about to escape, he had a final dinner with his father but did not tell him he was planning to escape because he didn't trust him.

Myeong Chul

Myeong Chul was among the few North Koreans who were considered trustworthy enough to become guards in political prison camps. His status was elevated due to his father's career as a North Korean intelligence officer. He was recruited in the Bowibu, the law enforcement community, when he was nineteen after he had served two years in the military. He like all the other guards had to sign a document vowing that he would not disclose the existence of the prison camps.

Moon Sung Sim

Moon Sung Sim was a pretty little girl who was an elementary school classmate of Shin's. Shin, Moon, and several other students were sent down into a mind shaft where they had to load a coal car and manually push it up a steep hill on its track. Moon lost her balance and her foot was wedged under the car. Her toe was mangled and cut off without anesthetics.

Kim Kwan Jin

The author interviewed Kim Kwan Jim who was a member of North Korea's upper crust. He grew up in Pyongyang and studied British literature at Kim Il Sung University where only the children of the elite were allowed to attend. He had observed the delivery of literally millions of dollars in cash to Pyongyang. It was money paid by international insurance companies; large sums of money always arrived on or around the leader's birthday. The money was used to buy luxuries for the elite class in order to maintain their support and loyalty. The money was part of the country's lucrative reinsurance scam.

Kim Jong Eun

Shin is the same age as Kim Jon Eun, the current (2015) supreme leader of North Korea, who took control of the nation after Kim Jong II, his father, in 2011. Their age is where any similarities between Shin and the Communist prince end. Kim Jong Eun has lived a pampered life of opulence since his birth. Although he had absolutely no military experience, Jong Eun was named a four-star general in the Korean People's Army in preparation for taking over for his father who was in failing health.

Kim Jong Eun has also been described in propaganda as "the spiritual pillar and lighthouse of hope" for the military and the people, a "genius in the literary arts." He is dedicated to making North Korea a nuclear power. The propaganda does not mention



the starving and abused people that this genius lighthouse is leading to superpower status.

Kim Jong Eun surprised everyone when he suddenly produced a wife and children. No one had ever seen them before. He and his wife began making high-profile visits around the country for photo-ops and to show the people his dedication to them. Some slogans in his bid to lift the spirits of the people include, “Let’s Breed More High-Yielding Fish!” “Let’s Expand Goat Rearing!” and “Let’s Grow More Sunflowers.”

Kim Jong Il

Kim Jong Il is the father of North Korea’s current (2015) supreme leader, Kim Jong Eun. Jong Il created the caste system that exists in the country. He also created Office 39 of the Korean Workers’ Party Central Committee in the 1970s. This office bought luxury items for the North Korean elite to be distributed to them so that they would remain loyal to Jong Il. He was also behind the reinsurance corruption and fraud that netted the Kim Dynasty millions and millions – richness that he did not share with the starving people who were subsisting on gruel and rodents.

Kim Il Sung

Kim Il Sung was Kim Jong Eun’s grandfather declared and established the fundamental purpose of North Korean prison camps. Guilt by associate is a legal consideration in the Communist country. A criminal is often imprisoned with his wife and children. The children of wrongdoers are considered tainted and just as guilty as the perpetrator. It was the thinking of Kim Il Sung that incarcerating the children of violators of the laws was the only way to wash away the sins of the father and destroy the evil seed that spawned the wrongdoing. His grandson was the spitting image of Kim Il Sung who was more beloved than his son, Kim Jong Il.

Kim Hye Sook and Kim Yong

Before Shin’s escape, Kim Hye Sook and Kim Yong were the only two defectors to escape from a North Korean prison. Hye Sook had spent twenty-eight years in Camp 18 before she fled in 2009 and found her way to South Korea through China, Laos and Thailand. Kim Yong was a lieutenant colonel who escaped from his position in a camp during a chaotic time of governmental breakdown. He was able to hide in a coal train that chugged its way out of Camp 18 with Yong aboard. He had contacts and made his way across the Chinese border without incident.

Charles Robert Jenkins

Charles Robert Jenkins had been a US Army sergeant serving in South Korea in 1965. He defected to North Korea and was a prisoner in Camp 14. The North Korean



government exploited his defection and used him as the evil Caucasian in propaganda movies critical of the US.

Uncle

Kim Jin Myung was Shin's cellmate in the underground prison. He told Shin he preferred that he call him Uncle. Uncle tended to the wound's that Shin had received during torture sessions. He told Shin stories about the outside world and the opportunities that existed for young men who lived there. He sparked Shin's interest and curiosity about living in something other than a prison. Uncle encouraged Shin to think about someday living in that world. When Shin was removed from the cell, he was sad having to leave Uncle who had been kind to him and seemed to care about him.

Hannah Song

Hannah Song was the executive director of LINK (Liberty in North Korea), the human rights organization that helped bring Shin over to the United States. Shin worked for Song in the LINK office in Torrance, California, for a period. Song was sad when he left the LINK office. She felt she should have done more to help him in his transition to normal life.

Harim Lee

Harim Lee joined the LINK offices during Shin's second summer there. They two were immediately attracted to each other and began dating. They both left the organization when there was concern about their dating which was against policy. Shin moved in with Harim and her parents in Seattle, Washington, for brief period. Together they formed an NGO called North Korea Freedom Plexus to help those defecting from North Korea.



Objects/Places

Reward Marriage

Shin's mother and father, Jang Hye Gyung and Shin Gyung Sub, were forced to be wedded in what was referred to as a "reward marriage." Neither had any say in the matter. Shin's father told him that he was paid for being a good lathe operator. His reward was being married to Jang.

Pellagra

Pellagra was a potentially disease that was common in the North Korean prison camps. It was due to the lack of protein and niacin in the diets of the prisoners. Symptoms of pellagra included weakness, skin lesions, diarrhea and dementia.

Roasted Rats

One way to fight pellagra was to bolster a diet with protein. Mice and rats were the only protein available to the camp prisoners. Shin and the other boys would capture the rats and roast them on a coal grill. The boys would peel the skin away and scrape the innards of the rodents away and eat the flesh, bones, and feet.

Caste System

One day Shin and a group of classmates had to go to the train station to load some spilled coal. They passed by a Bowiwon compound and were pelted with large rocks. Bowiwon people were considered North Korea's elite. A large stone caused a deep cut below Shin's eye. Some children were knocked out. The teacher soon followed and was angry with them for not doing their work. The children who were not unconscious had to carry the unconscious ones on their backs while they worked. Bowiwon children came from families who had been sanctified by the Great Leader. They were in their rights to stone the children of sinners. Kim Il Sung created this caste system in North Korea in 1957. Out of the 23 million people in North Korea, about 100,000 were considered Bowiwon or elite.

Rice

The main course of all meals for the prisoners in Camp 14 and the other prison camps in North Korea was corn gruel. Rice was the coveted food that everyone longed to have. The importance of Rice could not be overstated. It was important to North Korean culture. It signified everything that was dear to the people – wealth, family, and proper food.



Pig Farm

After Shin was initially assigned to the coal mines, a death sentence, when he was sixteen he was unexpectedly yanked from that assignment and sent to work on the camp's pig farm. It was a huge operation. Two hundred men and women worked on the farm and tended to eight-hundred pigs and other livestock including goats, rabbits and chicken. The prisoners were not allowed to eat any of the meat from the livestock, but there was a plethora of food lying about that included corn fed to the pigs. Shin was happy with his assignment. It wasn't treacherous work and there was plenty of food to steal and keep his belly filled.

“Song of the Winter Solstice”

When Shin was training Park in the garment factory, he was annoyed by Park's constant singing. Finally, Shin gave in and learned the lyrics to the song, “Song of the Winter Solstice” which recent defectors had learned as the theme song of a popular TV series. It was a fitting song because it spoke of companions who had to endure hard times and pain. It was the only song Shin knew at the time. It is the only one he sings now.

Human Smuggling Network

Long before Shin crawled over the prison camp fence, a successful and well-established human smuggling network was reaching deep within North Korea. Enough money reportedly would get anyone out of the clutches of the isolated Communist country. The network offered different “package” deals. A two-thousand dollar investment would involve months of travel to the target destination, Seoul. \$10,000 package would secure a plane ride to Beijing and then onto Seoul. Shin, of course, knew nothing of this network and didn't have a dime. He had to go it alone.

The Cheonan

The South Koreans didn't pay much attention to North Korea except on some occasions that they could not ignore. One example is North Korea's sneak attack by submarine on the South Korean warship named the Cheonan. The ship was in legitimate space, South Korean territorial waters, but the North launched an attack none the less. The Cheonan sank, and forty-six South Korean sailors died in the incident.

Office 39

Office 39 was located in the Korean Workers' Party Central Committee. The office was devoted to importing luxury items such as liquor and jewelry that was used to pamper the elite so that they would stay loyal to Kim Jong Il who had ordered the establishment

of the Office 39 operation. The office also funded the purchase of components for missiles and other military weaponry.



Themes

Prison Children

Shin In Geun was one of many children who were born and raised in a prison camp. The children of prison camps were told that they were imprisoned due to the sins of their parents. They could wash away the sins of their parents by working hard. Their guards were their teachers and more influential in their lives than their parents.

Life was brutal in these camps for kids. Shin saw his mother being forced into having sex with a guard when he was ten. And on other occasions he saw her tortured and heard her being called vile names. Shin was beaten if he was caught eating a pear from a tree. The children were allowed to eat rats, frogs, snakes and insects without a beating. The camp was overrun with rats and it was necessary to eat them to survive. Shin and the other boys would roast rats and grasshoppers.

Hunger led to lagging development in the children of North Korea. Teenage boys were five inches shorter than boys the same age in South Korean. It also caused mental retardation. North Korea has not produced enough food for its people since the 1990s. In the late 1990s, the government agreed to receive food aid. The United States became North Korea's biggest supplier of food even though it was its most highly criticized enemy.

As a young boy, Shin was in school ten hours a day, six days a week. One day the teachers searched everyone's pockets. He found a few kernels of corn in a young girl's pocket. He accusing the girl of stealing food, threatened to have her hands cut off and ordered her to the front of class where he beat her on her head with a wooden pointer. She died that night. The children had been conditioned to think they were at fault when they were beaten. Shin and the other students thought the little girl deserved it.

Children were given new school uniforms every two years even though the cheap fabric fell apart within months. The children were taught the basics and drilled on camp rules. Absences were not allowed even in the event of illness. The children were not taught about geography and had no idea what surrounded them on the earth. They were not allowed to ask questions and learned everything by repetition. Children like Shin knew nothing of the outside world and the teachers could therefore shape their views of the outside world.

Students were trained to be laborers. They were required to clear snow in the winter and clean privies where the guards lived. They had to work in the cold with no gloves. Each class was given daily work quotas. If all the students didn't meet their goals, they were all penalized. Shin worked in his first coal mine at age ten. Homework was focused on finding fault with themselves and confessing their shortcomings to the teacher so they could be punished.



Starvation

Outside the isolated prison camp, famine and floods were destroying the fragile economy. The nation relied on food from the United States and other countries to fight the famine of the late 90s. Against the wishes of the United States and the United Nations, North Korea insisted on distributing the donated food themselves. The UN wanted assurance that the food was going to the starving people but the situation was so dire that there wasn't time for debate.

More than \$1 billion was delivered to North Korea during the famine. It was estimated that as much as one third of the food was stolen and resold for personal profit. These thefts sparked interest in private markets and private farms which currently supply most of the food to North Korea although the problem of malnutrition has not been solved.

A disease that was common to those incarcerated in North Korean prison camps was pellagra. It was a condition that was associated with the lack of protein and niacin in the diet. Its symptoms included weakness, dementia and diarrhea. It was a potentially fatal disease. The only source of protein in camp was the rats and mice that were plentiful and which the boys would catch, roast and eat. It kept their bellies full and kept the pellagra at bay.

When Shin escaped in 2005, the North Korean guards stationed at the Chinese border had become more lax about who crossed over from North Korea to China. This relaxation of the erstwhile stringent border laws was due to starvation. The North Korean government allowed the defection of their people because there would be a few less mouths to feed.

Transition

Defectors who arrived in Seoul began to learn how North Korea compared to the modern world. The people learned about modern life from movies and TV programs. The government turned electricity off to some apartments when it learned that the residents were watching too much Western TV. Pyongyang blamed South Korea and the US for making escape from North Korea easier. 2004 saw the largest number of defectors when 468 North Koreans were flown from Vietnam to Seoul.

Defectors hate to answer questions and are suspicious of everyone. They are usually filled with guilt and shame and feelings of inferiority. Although they were free, the transition in their lives was a huge one. Things frightened them – like the noise when a washing machine started up. One girl gargled with fabric softener thinking it was mouthwash. In addition to stress and panic, some actually suffer from minor physical ailments. The escapees were also experiencing what prisoners across the globe often feel after release. Their lives in prison had been so routine and scheduled that suddenly having free time befuddles them.



Those escapees fortunate enough to make it to Seoul, South Korea – which is where most wanted to land because of language and culture – often found the transition to freedom not what they had envisioned. One of the main obstacles to a smooth transition was the attitude of South Koreans toward North Korean defectors. For one thing, it was verified that the South Koreans didn't care about their new citizens and didn't care to hear their harrowing stories. Books that have been written about the horrors in North Korean prison camps have had only scant sales in South Korea. President George W. Bush found one of the books, "The Aquariums of Pyongyang" to be one of the most influential books he'd ever read while South Koreans had no interest whatsoever in the subject.

Shin felt the distance that the South Koreans want to keep between them. He sensed, and rightly so, that the South Koreans looked down on their North Korean neighbors who they considered undereducated and unsophisticated. The Korean bar associated noted, "South Koreans, who publicly cherish the virtues of brother love, have been inexplicably stuck in a deep quagmire of indifference." (171) North Koreans continue to travel to South Korea because it follows the plans of human activists and North Koreans feel they will be most at home in the south because of language and culture.

Emotional Repression

Being born and raised in a prison camp where one's basic survival is a daily concern does not engender guilt or shame no matter what it takes to make it through the day. Shin had a mother who worked from dawn to dusk, a father who was home only a few days a years and brother who he only saw infrequently and didn't know at all. Shin and his mother fought over food. Despite the beatings she gave him for eating her food, he opted for the bumps and bruises rather than suffer from hunger. It seemed his stomach was never filled.

From the time he can remember, Shin was exposed to physical, mental, and psychological abuse – his own and those of others. He saw his mother raped, he saw people brutally punished for minor or imaginary violations. His own middle finger was cut off with a butcher knife because he had accidentally dropped a sewing machine that was way too heavy for him to be carrying.

In an environment like this, there was not time or space for emotions. Everyone was on his or her own. Emotions were so deeply repressed in this oppressive and brutal environment that the prisoners turned into something between human and animals. Shin hated his parents and they resented him. Shin overheard his mother and brother plotting to escape. Since he hated both of them, he turned them into the guards. They were arrested and executed. Shin had to watch his mother hang and his brother be shot to death by firing squad. He felt nothing. They deserved it for their violation.

But Shin did care and when he finally matured and was able to get away from the camp, the guilt and shame that he felt for being the reason his mother and brother were



executed overwhelmed him. He suffered from terrorizing nightmares and bouts of shame that landed him a psychiatric ward after his escape.

Shin was an abused child who was fed lies and brainwashed from the time he could remember. When he was able to step away and look back, he saw the error of his ways. Even though he was an innocent child, that guilt and shame though thrust upon him became his to bear. The rage at the lost years living as a sub-human is also something that Shin must deal with and an emotion that may be manifest in a number of ways.

The Revision

In the book's "Foreword," Blaine Harden relates how Shin contacted him in 2015 with his confession that he had not been entirely truthful with the story that he had told Harden. Shin's story had been included in this book which was published in 2012. Harden contacted the Washington Post as soon as he obtained a summary of the changes. He then flew to Seoul to get all the revisions and in an attempt to understand why Shin had fabricated parts of the original story. It was not good news for the writer who had attempted to be so careful and accurate with Shin's story.

In the revised story, Shin claims he was incarcerated in several prison camps rather than just Camp 14. Also, he had escaped to China twice not once. The conditions in Camp 18 where he spent some time were slightly better than those in Camp 14, although not great by any average person's standards. His accounts of physical abuse were consistent with his earlier version. One additional torture that he did not include in the first version was that his fingernails had been pulled out several times for minor violations of the camp's unreasonable regulations. During these interviews Shin seemed to be relieved that he was finally opening up and spilling everything he knew and remembered.

One may ask why the author and publisher didn't publish a revised book rather than just including a foreword explaining the fabrications in a foreword. The author mentions that given Shin's history, the author and publisher could only expect more revisions. In other words, is the latest version of Shin's story the final and truthful one?

In addition to changes about the degree and types of torture, Shin failed to mention that some prisoners were released and allowed to resume their lives. He admitted that he was jealous of his brother which led him to turn in his brother and mother. Also, he shared that he had lived with his father at Camp 18 for a period of time. He changed the date and timing of some events which he never thought would be important. After word of Shin's shifting story, North Korea issued propagandized statements and videos about Shin's criminality which Shin denies. Shin also revised some details about what occurred immediately following his escape. There are other differences. He maintains that he was born in a prison camp and suffered abuse and torture there until he was twenty-three.



Dr. Stevan M. Weine a specialist on the impact of political imprisonment and violence weighed in with his expert opinion. Very often an individual who goes through the type of trauma that Shin had will tell a flawless story without hesitation or lost memories. That is a big clue that the person has created a story and that certain facts are being withheld. Harden had always been concerned that he could not verify much of Shin's story. He regrets that he did not explore the psychological drivers that may have been at work to block out parts of the truth.



Styles

Structure

“Escape from Camp 14” by Blaine Harden is broken down into twenty-three chapters. The story is told in a mainly chronological order with a minimum of flashbacks or references to past events. The author tells the true story of Shin In Geun’s life in a political prison in North Korea. He interjects foreshadowing and the use of cliffhangers to add intrigue and interest to the story.

The author includes an epigraph credited to the North Korean Central News Agency that reads, “There is no human rights issue in this country, as everyone leads the most dignified and happy life.” Anyone who reads this book or anyone who has heard about the quality of life in North Korea (not to mention its prison camps) will know the absurdity of that statement.

The book includes several maps that illustrate Shin’s escape route and the layout of Camp 14. In the “Preface,” the author describes Shin’s first experience with executions as a young boy. Years later his mother and brother were executed in the same area. In the “Foreword,” the author explains that the 2015 publication of the book was issued with a new foreword that contains revisions of Shin’s story and his confession that he had lied in some of his earlier accounts. An appendix entitled, “The Ten Laws of Camp 14,” follows the last chapter as do “Acknowledgments” and “Notes” sections.

Perspective

“Escape from Camp 14” by Blaine Harden is a true account of a man’s escape from a prison camp in North Korea. Harden tells the story from the point of view of Shin Dong-hyuk who was born and raised in a prison camp and lived there until he was twenty-three years of age. Shin had no contact with the outside world and had no idea about the political and social struggles that were taking place nationwide in North Korea.

Shin had kept a diary of his life since he was able to make it to Shanghai after escaping from Camp 14, a prison camp in North Korea. After making it to safety in South Korea more than a year after his initial escape, he was encouraged by a counselor to turn his diary into a memoir. Subsequently to his initial memoir, his entire story was written by author Harden. Since word of his life as a prisoner was told, Shin has become the most famous witness to the unbelievable cruelty inflicted upon prisoners of North Korean prison camps. Shin told the story of his escape while Blaine Harden gave it more dimension by relating the details of Shin’s entire life story and his escape in the backdrop of the agony and suffering that all North Koreans live under.

Absorbing the full impact of Shin’s first twenty-three years is difficult due to the total disregard for human life and the complete apathy for another’s physical pain and mental anguish. It would be impossible for anyone other than Shin to tell his story.

The book was first published in 2012. However, in 2015, Shin contacted Harden to confess that he had lied about aspects of his story. The author emphasizes that the update in many ways is more disturbing than his original story.

Tone

“Escape from Camp 14” by Blaine Harden is written in a straightforward manner and style. Although he relates accounts of egregious treatment and unbelievable cruelty and disregard for human life and spirit, Harden doesn’t demagogue the information; he allows the facts to speak for themselves.

Shin related the story of his life to Harden and therefore the majority of the story is written from Shin’s point of view. With each claim that Shin makes of cruelty, starvation and abuse Harden backs them up with factual information gained from research studies whenever possible. In the case of the “starvation” of the North Korean people, Harden like everyone has heard the horrors of the malnourished nation. However, he doesn’t allow anecdotal information to carry the day; he provides statistical research that backs up the claims of starvation provided by human rights organizations, the United Nations and countries like the US that provide food aid to the isolated Communist nation.

Harden describes his meetings with Shin and the research and writing process that he conducted to complete this book. In his foreword, Harden understandably shows a degree of pique when he learned from Shin in 2015 that he had lied to Harden about some of the details in the book. Harden did not correct the book in the reissue but included the revisions that Shin made to his story in the foreword. He and his publisher may have decided against including the changes in the actual text of the book because of Harden’s experience with Shin and Shin’s reputation as a proven prevaricator. Maybe his latest revisions aren’t truthful either. Since there is no one to verify which version of Shin’s personal story is true, the original book published in 2012 was kept intact.



Quotes

The eighth rule of Camp 14, as Shin was required to memorize it, said, 'Should sexual physical contact occur without prior approval, the perpetrators will be shot immediately.

-- Author (Chapter 1 paragraph Page 16)

Importance: The eighth rule demonstrates the oppression that people lived under in North Korean prison camps.

Catching and roasting rats became a passion for Shin. He caught them in his house, in the fields, and in the privy. He would meet his friends in the evening at his primary school, where there was a coal grill to roast them. Shin peeled away their skin, scraped away their innards, salted what was left, and chewed the rest – flesh, bones, and tiny feet.

-- Author (Chapter 1 paragraph Page 21)

Importance: Since food was scarce, Shin and the other children ate whatever they could find, including rats and insects. The rats kept their bellies full and warded off pellagra which was a debilitating disease that was caused from lack of protein.

You have to wash away the sins of your mothers and fathers, so work hard!' the headmaster told them at assemblies.

-- Headmaster (Chapter 2 paragraph Page 27)

Importance: The children in North Korean prison camps were taught that they were in prison because of the crimes of their parents. The only way they would be free of their parents' sins was to work hard. It was a tactic that the government used to try to get as much effort out of the children as possible.

I was more faithful to guard than to my family. We were each other's spies.... Outsiders have a wrong understanding of the camp. It is not just the soldiers who beat us. It is the prisoners themselves who are not kind to each other. There is no sense of community. I am one of those mean prisoners.

-- Shin (Chapter 4 paragraph Page 49)

Importance: Shin confesses to the author how he had betrayed his family. He was suffering from guilt after turning his own mother and brother in for trying to escape. He had lived with that secret for years. He wants to clear the air and is hoping for some understanding from outsiders.

Suicide was not uncommon in the camp... A number of our neighbors took that road... They usually left behind letters criticizing the regime... Truth be told, some form of punishment would await the family regardless of whether or not a critical note were left behind. It was a rule that admitted no exceptions. The Party saw suicide as an attempt to escape its grasp, and if the individual who had tried the trick wasn't around to pay for it, someone else needed to be found.



-- Kang Chol-hwan (Chapter 9 paragraph Page 74)

Importance: Kang Chol-hwan had been a prisoner in Camp 15. The above quote is an excerpt from his memoir. There was no escaping punishment even by suicide. Those who took their own lives knew that their family would pay the price.

On the pig farm, that passive blankness returned. Shin used the word “relaxing” to describe his time on the camp farm, which lasted from 1999 to 2003.

-- Author (Chapter 11 paragraph Page 86)

Importance: This quote captures the only highlight of Shin’s twenty-three years in the prison camp. Working on the pig farm was “relaxing” compared to other jobs, like working in a coal mine, which was almost certain death. Since hunger was always looming, he felt fortunate to be on the pig farm where there was plenty of food to steal and keep him filled. He was ready to spend his life there.

By any measure, these expectations [to escape] were absurd. No one had escaped from Camp 14. Indeed, just two people other than Shin are known to have escaped from any political prison camp in North Korea and made it to the West.

-- Author (Chapter 14 paragraph Page 110)

Importance: When Shin and Park planned their escape, they were not realistic about their chances. Camp 14 was considered to have the best security system. No one had ever escaped from 14. If Shin had known that, he might have reconsidered trying.

No longer instantly recognizable as a runaway prisoner, he [Shin] had become just another ill-clothed, ill-shod, and ill-nourished North Korean. In a country where a third of the population were chronically malnourished, where local markets and train stations were crowded with filthy itinerant traders... Shin easily blended in.

-- Author (Chapter 16 paragraph Page 121)

Importance: Although Shin had his freedom after he escaped, he was met with starving and desolate people who had nothing-- not even hope. His new found liberty initially promised a life not much better than the one he had lived in the prison camp.

... The North Korean government concluded that the border had become far too porous and posed a threat to internal security. Pyongyang was particularly enraged by South Korean and American initiatives that made it easier for North Korean defectors who had crossed into China to travel even farther, and settle in the West.

-- Author (Chapter 18 paragraph Page 143)

Importance: The famine in the late 90s caused North Korea to relax border patrol due to many North Koreans crossing the border to seek food. Although the administration was “enraged,” they either had to put up with thousands more starving people or allow them to find food on their own. However, they expected the people to return to North Korea and not completely abandon the country. They weren’t facing reality: Why would anyone want to stay there?



Shin was reluctant to ask for anything. The teachers in the labor camp had punished children who asked questions. In Seoul, even when he was surrounded by solicitous and well-informed friends, Shin found it all but impossible to ask for help.

-- Author (Chapter 21 paragraph Page 169)

Importance: This quote captures the impact of the years of conditioning that Shin was subjected to in the prison camps. He had been taught to be silent and not ask questions for twenty-three years. It was difficult to suddenly feel free to do so even when he was in a safety zone.

The only birthdays that mattered in Camp 14 were those of Kim Jong Il and Kim Il Sung. They are national holidays in North Korea, and even in a no-exit labor camp, prisoners get the day off. As for Shin's birthday, no one paid attention when he was growing up, including Shin.

-- Author (Chapter 22 paragraph Page 170)

Importance: This quote illustrates the non-human way in which prisoners were treated in the camps. When Shin got out and established some friendships he celebrated his birthday for the first time in his life at the age of twenty-six.

I am evolving from being an animal. But it is going very, very slowly. Sometime I try to cry and laugh like other people, just to see if it feels like anything. Yet tears don't come. Laughter doesn't come.

-- Shin (Chapter 23 paragraph Page 180)

Importance: Shin's adjustment to life in the United States was difficult. He realized what a horrid life he had led in the prison camp. His memories didn't go away overnight. It was understandable that he wasn't in touch with his emotions that had been repressed for decades.



Topics for Discussion

Topic 1

What were the circumstances of the marriage between Shin's parents? What kind of relationship did his parents have over the years? How did it differ from a conventional marriage?

Topic 2

Describe the difference in the lives of the elite class and the common class in North Korea. What type of activities did members of the elite class sometimes participate in and why? How did the Kim Dynasty family live?

Topic 3

What are the two versions of Shin's story about the escape plans of his mother and brother? Why did he tell two versions? What sparked Shin's anger at his mother?

Topic 4

Why did the guards torture Shin about his mother's planned escape? What finally convinced the guards that he was telling the truth about turning in his mother and brother? What happened to the night guard who claimed credit for stopping the escape?

Topic 5

Describe how both Uncle and Park enlightened Shin to the outside world. How did they change his life? What were some basic things that people take for granted everyday of their lives that were unknown to Shin and that had to be explained to him? What were the chances that he would have tried to escape without hearing the stories of Uncle and Park?

Topic 6

Why was the headmaster upset with Shin when he returned from the underground prison? Why was he mistreated and abused by the student leader? Describe the role of a "jagubbanjang."



Topic 7

Describe the difference between the quality of life in North Korea and South Korea. What were the working conditions in the hydroelectric dam construction? Why did Shin like his job on the pig farm?

Topic 8

How did Shin change as he matured? How did the change manifest itself in the garment factory? Describe the incident in which Shin dropped a sewing machine. What was his punishment for being careless?

Topic 9

After Shin left Camp 14, how was hunting for enough food to eat different than it had been in prison? How did Shin procure food after his life at Camp 14? How did he get enough money to buy food?

Topic 10

What adjustments did Shin have to make in general relative to his independence? What disappointed him about his reception in South Korea? Why was he a disappointment to the Americans who helped bring him to the States?