

The Last Gulags

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While I was breakfasting several years ago with a former high-ranking South Korean intelligence official, the question of how to deal with reunification of the Koreas came up. The South Korean responded, bluntly and emphatically, that this could never happen. The North Koreans, he held, were totally brainwashed, ignorant of the world outside their country's borders, and unable to comprehend, let alone live in, the twenty-first-century world. It would be better, he hinted, if they were just to disappear in a nuclear attack.

It turns out that South Korean attitudes toward the people of North Korea, while not nearly as cold and bloodless as the former intelligence official's, are similarly skeptical. As former *Washington Post* correspondent Blaine Harden explains in *Escape from Camp 14*, South Koreans, when they think about the North at all, see their ethnic brethren as "ill-educated, ill-spoken, and badly dressed bumpkins whose mess of a country is more trouble than it is worth." (At the same time, in the West and especially the United States, North Korea is treated as a caricature of evil, evoking ridiculous images that empty the regime of legitimacy but also make it seem just a little less menacing.)

It is this skeptical indifference that greets defectors from North Korea, including Shin Donghyuk, the subject of *Escape from Camp 14*. Shin, who now lives in the United States and South Korea, is the first North Korean to escape from one of the country's gulags who also was born in a labor camp. Harden carefully and humanely recounts Shin's life in the camp, his flight into and odyssey through China, and how he has fared in the years since his escape.

It is at times harrowing reading, a sober antidote to the cartoonish imagery that has rendered banal the evil that Shin's story makes very real: "Unlike those who have survived a concentration

camp, Shin had not been torn away from a civilized existence and forced to descend into hell. He was born and raised there. He accepted its values. He called it home."

Shin's "crime" was to have been born to a father who was imprisoned because his two brothers had left for the South during the Korean War. Under the neo-feudalistic thinking that governs how Pyongyang determines political trustworthiness, Shin and his father were part of the "hostile class," those who, besides having relatives who fled to South Korea, include

former property owners and Christians. They now, Harden writes, "work in mines and factories." They are not allowed into universities.

Camp 14, where Shin was born and lived until his escape at age 23, houses about 15,000 inmates. (Amazingly, it and other labor camps are visible on Google Earth. Type in "Camp 14, Korea" in the search bar.) As many as 200,000 Koreans may be imprisoned in such camps. They are huge enterprises, extracting labor from inmates in factories or coal mines. Most of the camps, like Camp 14, are called "complete control districts." There is no reeducation here: The inmates are worked to death.

Harden has given us, with Shin's story, a gripping eyewitness account not only of life lived under the most inhumane conditions, but also of the struggle to exist once released into modern society. The survivor's psychological wounds become more pronounced as he bounces between the United States and its welcoming human rights groups, and South Korea, which institutionally tries to help integrate North Korean defectors while the society itself remains indifferent if not hostile. Shin captures his own plight: "I am evolving from being an animal."

Escape from Camp 14 should help raise international awareness of the only functioning concentration camp system in the world, a system that has endured longer than the camps of Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union. ■

Escape from Camp 14: One Man's Remarkable Odyssey from North Korea to Freedom in the West
by Blaine Harden. Viking, 2012.