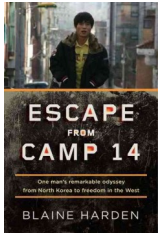


Escape from Camp 14 : one man's remarkable odyssey from North Korea to freedom in the West

Escape from Camp 14



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This terrifying book is based on the diary of Shin Dong-Hyuk, who was born in a brutal labor camp in North Korea. In *Escape from Camp 14* journalist and writer Blaine Harden tells this young man's story--the only person born in a labor camp to ever escape from one.

The writing in this book is mesmerizing, but warning: this is not a book you will want to read while enjoying a cool glass of lemonade or munching an apple. It's horrifying on so many levels. The first being that camps such as these still exist where people are forced to do slave labor even as children, where torture is routine, and where almost everyone including the guards are starving. These camps have existed far longer than Soviet gulags but they are less well-known.

Sex is banned in the camps, except as a reward for hard-working prisoners. That is how Shin was brought into being. His parents had two children, but he barely knew his older brother. He lived with his mother only until age five, and so hard was their life that he often stole her lunch to survive.

In elementary school, the children slept on the floor of rudimentary shacks with the strongest boys muscling close to the fire. Even young primary school children were sent to mine coal underground during their "school day." One of Shin's childhood friends was almost crushed to death. Beatings were common. One teacher pummeled Shin's fellow student so severely in front of the class that she died that night. Her crime: she was found with six grains of raw corn in her pocket, obviously stolen.

The camp had rules strongly enforced: one was a death sentence for stealing food. Everyone still did it; otherwise they would not have survived. One of Shin's favorite assignments was a year spent building a bridge over a river--in his off-hours he hunted rats and fished. During this year, Shin was better fed than during any other period until his adult assignment to a pig farm. In the Korean labor camps--it's one person for himself. Students and adult workers are taught to snitch on others. It's also a survival mechanism. If someone tries to escape and is caught their relatives are either hung or imprisoned. On one of Shin's infrequent visits home to see his mother, he finds his brother there. While pretending to sleep, Shin overhears them talking about the brother's escape plans. Not only that but his mother cooks rice for him. A large quantity that took weeks to steal in small batches. Shin has not had rice for a very long time. The younger son faces a moral quandary, will he tell on his nearest family members or not?

In any case, he ends up in prison. Here he meets an older man, his cell-mate who has been to Russia, China and South Korea. This man often tells Shin stories about grilled meat which Shin has never tasted. The man nurses Shin to health, but it's his stories that intrigue the teenager. He knew nothing of the outside and now his cellmate has made him curious about it.

Not until he gets his second adult work assignment to a sewing factory, where he oversees many women workers, does Shin connect again to another human being. One he is supposed to be spying on. But Park too has seen the outside world and has many stories also. One very telling scene occurs when Park sings in the sewing factory. Shin orders him, then begs him to stop. Shin has never heard a human sing. It frightens him and at the same time entices him. Later, Park tells Shin what he did to get imprisoned and even though the authorities demand that Shin rat on him, Shin insists that Park has told him nothing. With this man, Shin plans a daring escape. Later, Shin says that he did not try to escape for any moral reasons but only for a good meal.

The end of the book discusses Shin's arrival in South Korea and later the States. As you might guess, adjustment was incredibly hard.

Although the book primarily focuses on Shin's story, you also learn a lot about the culture and daily life in North Korea. Since the 1990s when Russia and China cut their financial support, much of the population has not had enough food. The North Korean government responded with motivating slogans such as "Let's Eat Two Meals a Day" and "Arduous March." North Korean insurance companies also instigated several major scams where they secured millions from international companies based on false claims. Most of this money went to the ruler, Kim Jong-il.

Labor camp life was--and still is--brutal. It violates many human rights. This book leaves the reader wondering what he or she can do to change an unjust system that harms so many children and their families.

Two other books related by theme include *Farewell to Manzanar* about the Japanese-American internment camps during WWII and *The Last Jew of Treblinka*. It tells the story of a man who wrote the only survivor's memoir about a holocaust death camp.

Posted by Dory L. on August 9, 2012

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