

→ Mark your confusion.

→ Purposefully annotate the article (1-2 mature, thoughtful responses per page to what the author is saying)

→ Write a 250+ word response to the article.

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Surviving a North Korean Prison Camp

By Catherine Garcia for *The Week*, October 26, 2017

At any moment, one of Camp 14's guards could stop Shin Dong-hyuk and demand he recite the Ten Laws. Without missing a beat, Shin had to start rattling them off — do not try to escape, do not steal, report suspicious behavior immediately — knowing that breaking any of the rules usually ended with the culprit being shot on the spot.

Shin memorized the Ten Laws alongside other children born to political prisoners inside this North Korean internment camp. It was made clear to all of them from an early age that as far as the government was concerned, they were born to work, then die, in the camp. Prisoners were forced to toil in mines and factories producing everything from rubber to shoes to paper. They might perish at the hands of a guard who caught them hoarding a few corn kernels, or drop dead in the coal mine — it didn't really matter to the regime. They were there to atone for the sins of their families.

"From the very beginning, we are told it's impossible to leave," Shin, now in his 30s, told *The Week* through a translator. "They want us to understand that. It's how they get the people to stay."

Shin ultimately defied the Ten Laws, escaping from the camp he was transferred to, Camp 18, and making it to China. Since the end of the Korean War in 1953, more than 30,000 North Koreans have defected to South Korea, Seoul says. Many cross into China first, and settle in South Korea or sizable communities in Washington, D.C., and Los Angeles. In September, the South Korean government said the number of North Koreans defecting this year dropped 13 percent, likely because of tighter border security in North Korea and China.

Shin is one of the most famous North Korean defectors, the only one known to have been born and raised in a camp. His parents did not meet and fall in love on their own; they were each other's reward for doing good work in the camp. A few times a year, the guards would announce which men and women had been chosen to marry, and Shin's father, Shin Gyung Sub, later told him he had been paired up with his mother, Jang Hye Gyung, because of his skills in the machine shop. Shin had an older brother, who lived with him and his mother, but their father was only allowed to visit a few times a year. The family slept on the concrete floor of their room, and ate watery gruel, which Shin supplemented with rats, frogs, and insects that he caught after dark.

The women in the camp were called [terrible names], and the men were [as well]. It was an ultra-violent environment, with Shin routinely witnessing his classmates being whipped and beaten and adults being executed, he said. The children of guards were taught that the inmates were bad, and they would throw huge rocks at them, knocking some unconscious and causing huge gashes in the faces of others. During Shin's youth, North Korea was led by Kim Il-Sung and, following his death in 1994, his son Kim Jong-Il. Unlike children in schools outside of the camps, they didn't get the same indoctrination regarding Dear Leader and the greatness of North Korea, and learned the bare minimum about addition, subtraction, and grammar.

"People inside the camp don't have much political or societal use, because they are just pure sources of physical human labor," Shin said. "There's no reason to invest any effort into loving the leader or knowing the history of the regime."

Kim Hak-Min did learn about the Dear Leader in school, and as a kindergarten student was taught the United States was "the absolutely worst country on this planet," he told *The Week* through a translator. The children heard exaggerated stories of North Korea's military prowess and the wickedness of the United States, but still, he questioned this, especially after hearing stories from a relative about the kindness of American soldiers he witnessed during the Korean War.

"Even though I was a child, it was my philosophy to base my opinions on my own personal experiences," he said.

North Korea has a caste system, called songbun, with the elite living in the capital, Pyongyang. A person's status depends on the background of their ancestors and behavior of relatives, and determines jobs and if a person can join the Workers' Party of Korea. Kim said his great-great grandparents were forced into a camp, and as soon as that happened, his family was kicked out of Pyongyang, their songbun downgraded. They were resettled in the country's northernmost region, and when his parents became adults, they were assigned to work as coal miners. It wasn't a prison camp, but they were stuck.

"There was a lot of fear, and we were very afraid of the camps," Kim said. "We were aware of them."

Files are kept on every person living in North Korea, with their family histories. If someone wants to travel across internal borders, they have to ask permission, Kim said, which is often denied after security agents check their files.

"Growing up, I was never allowed to go 50 kilometers from my hometown," he said.

Bribery helped people gain permission to travel, and as Kim would find out as a young man, allowed others to live a life of freedom. During a terrible famine that lasted from 1994 to 1997, his mother went to China as part of a wave of economic migrants, made some money, and returned to North Korea. At the time, it wasn't as difficult to cross the border, and she shared what life was like in China and what she learned about South Korea. More North Koreans returned in the early 2000s, this time with South Korean media.

"It was a shocking realization that the world is not the way you thought it was," he said. "We were being misled. We learned this from word of mouth, films, and radio."

Kim was always interested in technology, tinkering with televisions and VCRs. North Korean televisions are restricted to just one channel, but living in the northernmost region, Kim took apart his TV, did his magic, and was able to pick up Chinese channels.

"I started watching international media, seeing ads directed for the Chinese for brands like Samsung and LG," Kim said. "It was an incredibly awakening experience."

He wasn't the only one watching forbidden media. Someone would mention watching a film that wasn't available in North Korea, and conversations would start, with people eventually coming together to watch Chinese movies. Kim was caught with prohibited movies three times — once as a 17-year-old, with the infraction ignored, and later by a police officer his father knew, who turned a blind eye. The third time, it was 2011 and he was 25 years old. Kim was watching a film with 10 others, and four, including Kim, were detained.

"One was told because he watched one single film, he would be in prison camp for five years," Kim said. "The guards said I was probably going to die in a prison camp. One of my friends later died in the prison camp after one year, one escaped, and one died in the detention center because of malnutrition."

Kim said he "was settled with dying in prison," but a month later, he was released. He had done so much for his neighbors, fixing their television sets, radios, and watches for free, that they went to the police and bribed them, begging for Kim's release. "Bribery is becoming an integral part of society," he said. "In a normal prison camp, with enough money you can ensure your survival and exit. It's still rare, but it shows signs of growing instability."

It wasn't long after he left the detention center that his girlfriend's mother, who had defected to China, paid brokers to sneak Kim and his girlfriend over the border to safety. Shin's escape wasn't as simple. As a teenager, he had falsely implicated his mother and brother in a murder, and they were executed. (Shin originally told his biographer in the book *Escape from Camp 14* that he had turned them in for planning an escape, because he had been too ashamed to say what he had really done. Experts say this is common for a person who has undergone extreme trauma, and he may also have recanted some of his story because he feared for his father's safety in North Korea.)

He was tortured, his fingernails ripped out and a hook put into his back, used to lower him over a fire. In 2005, he met a new prisoner named Park who had lived in Pyongyang and told him about the outside world. They made an escape plan, with Park attempting to cross an electrified fence first. He was killed instantly, and Shin used his body as a shield from the current. Shin's leg slipped and he suffered extreme burns and has permanent scarring, but he made it out undetected, and ultimately reached the northern

border, where he bribed guards with stolen food and cigarettes to let him cross.

Shin, who lives in the U.S. now and has detailed his experience in North Korea in front of the U.N., and Kim, who resides in South Korea and has started a business repairing electronics, met for the first time last week at Pomona College in Southern California. They were invited to speak by Bluebird NK, a nonprofit started by 19-year-old student John Park, dedicated to educating and mentoring North Korean defectors. They listened to each other describe their lives in North Korea, and Kim, visiting the United States for the first time, fondly recalled the camaraderie he once felt with his neighbors.

"There's a big sense of community," he said. "Honestly, if the regime there wasn't totalitarian, I'd like to go back to visit. That near miss of going to the prison camp was because of the kindness of my town. These were people who spent money they could have used on food on a bribe. Even during famines, there was a strong sense of sharing and helping each other out. I've never seen this same sense of openness and community anywhere else."

Having spent much of his life in forced labor camps, Shin didn't have that same type of bond with his fellow prisoners. He believes North Korea followed in the footsteps of Nazi Germany — Adolf Hitler rose to power after making promises for a better society, and that's what happened in North Korea in 1945.

"People don't like complexities or making trouble," he said. "You just follow the leader. ... It takes so long for people to start changing their minds. It takes prison camps, mass suffering, famine, executions, torture, for people to very, very slowly start realizing they are in a problematic system."

For 72 years, North Korea has been "extremely effective" in blocking access to education on democracy and freedom, Shin said. With the government promising to take care of everything, people go with the flow, but more and more are becoming aware of the North Korean regime's failures. "We don't know what is going to happen," he said. "For all we know, war could start from antagonism or a mistake. It's a very bleak, unsure future, but it could get marginally better."

He does believe that "those who think North Korea is going to collapse easily are absolute morons." Kim Jong Un is harsh and always one step ahead, and it's time for American policymakers to move beyond narrow sanctions while remembering the people who live in North Korea and will be affected by their decisions.

"The regime is about survival," Shin said. "While the U.S. is focusing on sanctions, the regime is focusing on 10 different ways to survive. They are so smart; they can control 23 million individuals, and make them so afraid they can't do anything."

Response Options:

- What does Shin argue that the United States should do about North Korea? What evidence does he use to support his stance? Summarize and respond using They Say, I Say (sample template below).

The general argument made by author X in her/his work, _____, is that _____. More specifically, X argues that _____. She/he writes, “_____.” In this passage, X is suggesting that _____. In conclusion, X’s belief is that _____.

In my view, X is wrong/right, because _____. More specifically, I believe that _____. For example, _____. Although X might object that _____, I maintain that _____. Therefore, I conclude that _____.

- Does anything in the article surprise you? Explain.