

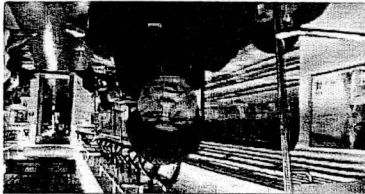
Born in a forced labor camp, he knew nothing of the outside world. Then he breached the barbed wire

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By BLAINE HARDEN



Shin Dong-hyuk was born into captivity and lived in a labor camp until just a few years ago. Now, having fled North Korea, he now lives in Seoul, broadcasting a weekly web show featuring other North Korean defectors. WSJ's Evan Ramstad reports.

On Jan. 2, 2005, 23-year-old Shin Dong-hyuk squirmed through an electric fence and escaped from Camp 14, a political prison camp in North Korea. Between 150,000 and 200,000 people are estimated to be held in the country's political camps, and Mr. Shin is the only person known to have been born in a camp who has made his way to the West. (His father, Mr. Shin eventually learned, was a prisoner because two of his

brothers had defected to the south during the Korean War. Mr. Shin's crime was being his father's son. In this excerpt from "Escape From Camp 14," Blaine Harden details his unlikely escape.

In 1998, when Shin turned 16, he became an adult worker. His years of schooling to that point had only served as training for hard labor.

Many of his classmates were assigned to coal mines, where accidental death from cave-ins, explosions and gas poisonings was common. Shin was lucky—he was assigned to a pig farm, where 200 men and women raised about 800 pigs, along with goats, rabbits, chickens and a few cows. As a prisoner, Shin was not allowed to eat the meat of any livestock on the farm. But he and other prisoners could sometimes steal. The smell of roasting pork on the farm would alert guards, leading to beatings and weeks of half-rations, so they ate purloined pork raw.

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In March 2003, Shin was transferred to the camp's garment factory, a crowded, chaotic, stressful work site where 2,000 women and 500 men made military uniforms. Meals were skimpy, hours were endless, and Shin was always hungry. There was pressure to snitch on fellow prisoners.



now to fix sewing machines and

Author Blaine Harden tells the story of Shin Dong-hyuk, one of the few people born in a North Korean political prison to have escaped and survived. He talks with WSJ's John Bussey.

said. "He's holding out on us."

In October 2004, Shin and Park began spending 14 hours a day together. Park paid polite attention to Shin's instructions on sewing machine maintenance. Just as politely, he avoided questions about his past. But after a few weeks, Park began to open up. He said he was raised in a large apartment in Pyongyang and had followed the privileged educational trajectory of North Korea's elites, studying in East Germany and the Soviet Union. He patiently attempted to explain what life was like outside Camp 14.

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A Conversation with Shin Dong-hyuk

As they walked the factory floor, Park told Shin that the giant country next door was called China. Its people were rapidly getting rich. He said that in the south there was another Korea. In South Korea, he said, everyone was already rich. Park explained the concept of money. He told Shin about the existence of television and computers and mobile phones. He explained that the world was round.

Much of what Park talked about, especially at the beginning, was difficult for Shin to understand or care about. What delighted him—what he kept begging Park for—were stories about food and eating. These were the stories that kept Shin up at night fantasizing about a better life. Freedom, in Shin's mind, was just another word for grilled meat.

Intoxicated by what he heard, Shin made perhaps the first free decision of his life. He chose not to snitch. And he soon began thinking about escape.

Their plan was simple—and insanely optimistic. Shin would get them over the fence. Park would lead them to China, where his uncle would give them shelter, money and assistance in traveling on to South Korea.

Their chance came around New Year's Day, a rare holiday when machines in the factory went silent for two days. Shin learned in late December that on Jan. 2, his crew of sewing-machine repairmen and some of the seamstresses would be escorted to a mountain ridge on the eastern edge of the camp. There, they would spend the day trimming trees and stacking wood. He and Park agreed they would try their escape that day.

Early that morning, a foreman herded Shin, Park and about 25 other prisoners up the mountain. The sky was clear and the sun shone brightly on a heavy snow pack, but it was cold and the wind was blowing.

The firewood detail placed Shin and Park within a stone's throw of the fence that ran along the spine of the mountain. A guard tower rose from the fence line about a quarter mile to the north. Guards, walking two abreast, patrolled the perimeter of the fence. Shin noticed lengthy intervals between patrols.

At around 4 p.m., Shin and Park sidled toward the fence, trimming trees as they moved. No one seemed to notice.

Shin soon found himself facing the fence, which was about 10 feet high. The fence consisted of seven or eight strands of high-voltage barbed wire, spaced about a foot apart, strung between tall poles.

He and Park had told each other that if they could get through the fence without touching the wires, they would be fine. As to how they might be able to do that, they were not sure. Yet as the hour of the escape drew nearer, Shin surprised himself by not feeling afraid.

It was time "I let's run!" he yelled



Manchul Kim for The Wall Street Journal
Shin Dong-hyuk standing in front of a section of the Berlin Wall on display in Seoul, South Korea, on March 21.

Their plan had been for Shin to stay in the lead until they got clear of the fence, but he slipped and fell to his knees on the icy patrol trail.

Park was first to the fence. Falling to his knees, he shoved his arms, head and shoulders between the two lowest strands of wire. Seconds later, Shin saw sparks and smelled burning flesh.

Most electric fences built for security purposes repel trespassers with a painful but exceedingly brief pulse of current. Lethal electric fences, however, use a continuous current that can make a person lock on to the wire as voltage causes involuntary muscle contractions, paralysis and death.

Before Shin could get to his feet, Park had stopped moving. The weight of his body pulled down the bottom strand of wire, pinning it against the snowy ground and creating a small gap in the fence. Shin crawled over his friend's body, using it as a kind of insulating pad. As he squirmed through the fence, Shin could feel the current.

Shin was nearly through the fence when his lower legs slipped off Park's torso and came into direct contact, through the two pairs of pants he was wearing, with the bottom strand. Voltage from the wire caused severe burns from his ankles to his knees. But it would be a couple of hours before Shin noticed how badly he had been injured.

When he cleared the fence, he had no idea where to go. The only direction he could comprehend was down. He ran for about two hours, always heading downhill, until he entered a mountain valley. There were barns and scattered houses. He heard no alarms, no gunfire, no shouting. As far as he could tell, no one was chasing him. As the adrenaline of flight began to ebb, Shin noticed that the legs of his pants were sticky. He rolled them up and saw blood oozing out of his legs. It was very cold, well below 10 degrees Fahrenheit. He had no coat.

Park had not told him where he might find China.

—From "Escape From Camp 14" by Blaine Harden, to be published Thursday by Viking, a member of the Penguin Group (USA). Copyright © 2012 by Blaine Harden.

Finding Mr. Shin

In 2008, I was a correspondent for the Washington Post, looking for a story about North Korea. I heard about Shin Dong-hyuk through the U.S. Committee for Human Rights in North Korea, and we met in Seoul. My first article about him skinned the surface of his life, but over the next three years, during weeks of conversations in Seoul and the U.S., he allowed me to explore his past more fully.

North Korea denies the existence of the camps (although they are visible in satellite photos). At least 26 other eyewitnesses from the camps have made it to the free world. (Two escaped; the others were released before defecting through China.) Mr. Shin's story has been vetted and scrutinized by former camp prisoners and guards, as well as by South Korean lawyers and international human rights investigators. Scars on his back, legs and right hand corroborate his accounts of torture and escape.

—Blaine Harden

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