

AQUARIUMS OF PYONGYANG

Ten Years in the North Korean Gulag

Told by Dang Chol-hwan

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Summary

The book shows how a powerful family with money and material goods has everything taken away from them by the North Koreans. Kang's family, while of Korean ethnicity, originally lived in Japan before emigrating to the DPRK at the behest of his communist grandmother. When Kang was nine years old, his grandfather was imprisoned for suspected activity against the State. The policy at the time was to incarcerate the immediate family of political prisoners, His grandmother; father, uncle and younger sister Miho were all imprisoned at the Yodok concentration camp #2915. They suffered and saw many atrocities over a period of ten years including disease, starvation, torturous punishments and one public execution.

Following his family's release (presumably upon the death of his grandfather, the original offender against the State) Kang worked in assigned occupations before becoming at risk of again being sent to a concentration camp. The end of the book was about his escape to China and attempts to seek asylum before escaping to South Korea.

It is one of the first published accounts of the North Korean prison system, and earned Kang an audience with the President of the United States.

The human rights record of North Korea is extremely hard to understand because of the secretive and closed nature of the country. The North Korean government makes it real difficult for foreigners to enter the country and strictly monitors their activities. Aid workers are subject to considerable scrutiny and excluded them from places and regions the government does not wish them to enter or see. Since citizens cannot freely leave the country, it is mainly from stories of refugees and defectors that the nation's human rights record has been constructed. The government's position, expressed through Korean News Agency, is that North Korea has no human rights issue, because its socialist system was chosen by the people and serves them faithfully. While it is difficult to piece together a clear picture of the situation within the country, it is clear that the government of North Korea controls almost all activities within the nation. People are not allowed to speak freely and the arrests those who speak against the government. Radio, Television and news organizations are deemed legal are only those operated by the government. The media, praises the leader of North Korea and paints a picture for all to know.

A number of human rights organizations and governments have condemned North Korea's human rights record. North Korea has charged that those who make allegations about human rights in the country are interfering in the country's internal affairs and trying to force down their values. North Korea strongly rejects all reports of human rights violations and accuses the defectors of lying and promoting a pro-West agenda.

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The high moment of this book was when the family arrived at North Korea from Tokyo, Even after they were prospering in Tokyo Japan and becoming wealthy with members of their families going to expensive schools, they were convinced that living in North Korea would be beneficial for them. They dreamed of a better life for all the family members. But once they arrived, they were so surprised of how the people there were so different and afraid. All that they have heard about the North Koreans was pure propaganda. They soon found out that they had made a big mistake and it was too late for them to leave. Soon, the government officials took most of their belongings and were sent to a concentration camp. From being wealthy, to almost dying in a concentration camp was the biggest turnaround in life I have ever heard.