Riding the Seoul Train

An underground railroad leads North Korean refugees to the South

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"A LOT OF PEOPLE chatting in a foreign language," Ho says. "We were arrested for watching it." The punishment-three months in a re-education camp-shattered Ho's faith in the North Korean regime. Branded a "hooligan," he turned to the black market when famine swept the country in 1996. He was arrested again, this time for smuggling antique pottery, and sent to a koppaku ("reform through labor") camp 150 kilometers south of the Chinese border. Guards "beat me like an animal," he says. He survived (minus nine teeth), and in 1999 escaped into China across the frozen Tumen River.

That was only the start of his journey. In China Ho barely avoided being nabbed in a sweep for undocumented immigrants. After saving $50 from working in a factory that produced karaoke machines, he bought the cheapest ticket he could and, with the help of his rudimentary Chinese, headed south as far as Vietnam. He crossed the border on foot, dressed in rags and applied for asylum at the South Korean Embassy in Hanoi. But, he says, "they told me, 'This is a communist country, so we can't help you here. Go to Thailand'." A sympathetic diplomat slipped him $100; in Ho Chi Minh City, South Korean missionaries offered more cash and guidance. Ho, pretending to be a deaf-mute and occasionally shouting "Korea!" to see if anyone spoke his language, trekked across mine-strewn Cambodia. Finally, after almost three months on the road, he staggered into Bangkok. South Korean diplomats there granted him asylum.

Ho's itinerary might seem outlandish the resourceful 33-year-old traveled more than 5,000km to cross the 198km between Pyongyang and Seoul. But more and more refugees are following equally roundabout paths from North to South Korea. They're hiding in Siberia, hiking the Burmese highlands, wandering the Mongolian steppes during the fiercest winter in half a century. Ragged asylum-seekers like Ho now trickle into Seoul at the rate of roughly three per day from as far afield as Copenhagen, Dubai, Ulan Bator and Moscow. "We even thought of taking them through Tibet," says one of those who help sustain the underground railroad. "But we decided they'd be too weak to endure the altitude." This year, more than a thousand North Koreans could land up in Seoul, about as many as have arrived since the end of the Korean War.

In a four-month investigation, NEWSWEEK explored this clandestine network drawing North Koreans to the South. From the Tumen River, its paths extend throughout Asia, Central Asia, Russia, even as far as Western Europe. More than 60 organizations and individual activists, and several thousand collaborators, are involved. Participants include Buddhist and Christian charities, underground missionaries, profit-seeking middlemen, crooked cops and-beyond China's borders-Japanese housewives, Burmese rebels, right-wing South Korean politicians and diplomats in at least nine countries. Depending on route and comfort level, a ride on the Seoul Train can take anywhere from a month to a year and cost upwards of $3,000.

Not many North Koreans have the money or stamina necessary to make these often-grueling journeys. But the fact that thousands are desperate enough to try bodes ill for Pyongyang. Whereas most North Koreans once sought food in China to bring back home, many now view their departures as permanent, and hope, after amassing the necessary capital in China, to seek asylum in South Korea. Already, an estimated 300,000 refugees live in villages and cities scattered across northeast China, where they are periodically

rounded up and deported in what human-rights activists decry as a clear violation of the 1951 Geneva Convention. Aid agencies warn that thousands more may join them this spring-by Pyongyang's own admission, the greatest number since 1997-when last year's dismal harvest runs out.

The Seoul-based Commission to Help North Korean Refugees (CNKR), the largest organization dedicated to assisting asylum-seekers, has collected nearly 10 million signatures on a petition to the United Nations demanding refugee status for North Koreans who have fled to China. The group plans to present the document to the U.N. General Assembly in New York next month. Sam Rho, a leading figure in CNKR, acknowledges that the appearance of refugee camps in China might trigger a huge exodus. "That is our objective," he says. "If many refugees escape, then North Korea will be crushed like an Easter egg."

On the Border

Physically, the Tumen River is not much of a barrier. The meandering waterway, which forms the border between China and North Korea, can be swum in the spring, waded in the fall, walked across during the long winter freeze. Like thousands of his countrymen, Kim Ryong Il (not his real name) has already crossed the river three times. His paper mill shut down in 1995. Last year he sought help from relatives in China and returned to bring money to his family. When he went back a second time, he was arrested and forcibly repatriated. In prison he endured beatings and constant interrogations.

"The secret police asked everyone the same questions," he says. "'Did you contact South Koreans? Did you go to church? Did you meet foreigners?'" The ordeal ended when, during his transfer to a labor camp, he escaped from an outhouse and fled for the third time to China. After crossing the Tumen in mid-January, he had barely enough strength to stand. "I will never set foot in my country again," he told NEWSWEEK at the time. "If I have to die, I will die here in China." Once he regained his strength, he planned to find his way to South Korea.

Other exiles are beginning to undergo a similar hardening of attitudes. In 1998 the South Korean charity group Good Friends, which distributes food and aid among refugees along the border, estimated that most of the North Koreans then living in China were single men seeking food and money for families back home. A follow-up study released last month revealed a major demographic shift the group found that approximately 60 percent of new arrivals are now women, and nearly a third say they're "unlikely" to return home. Further, 14 percent claim Workers Party membership, one in four blames the famine on "problems with leaders" and a huge majority-77 percent-thinks North Korea will prove "unable to recover from the crisis on its own." The implication is that the forces driving many of the refugees to flee have changed. One doctor now in Seoul escaped with eight of her relatives, including an Army officer, a journalist and a businessman with overseas-travel privileges. "We didn't leave because we were hungry," she says. "We hated the dictatorship."

Getting to China, where North Koreans face harsh living conditions and the threat of arrest, is not enough. Tens of thousands hide in villages scattered across the northeast doing menial day labor or sharecropping.

Lacking identity papers, they have a hard time traveling, their children cannot attend school and infants are born stateless. Women face the possibility of ending up as virtual slaves in brothels and falling prey to professional bride-traffickers.

The longer refugees endure these conditions, too, the greater the chance of discovery by Chinese authorities.

For those who would rather take their chances on the road, the first stop is often Yanji, a bustling city of 320,000 people, only 55km from the border. Yanji serves as the capital of Chaoxianzu prefecture, named after China's ethnic Koreans, who make up 70 percent of its population. The youngest of the North Korean refugees, known as kokchebi, or "fluttering swallows," panhandle in its open markets. Sad teenage women peddle sex in dozens of pink-lit karaoke bars. An estimated 30,000 exiles currently hide in and around the city.

Their presence makes Yanji a battleground of sorts between the two Koreas.

Pyongyang has stationed secret agents in several shabby Yanji hotels to monitor missionaries and suspected spies and, on occasion, to snare high-profile defectors. They keep a particularly close eye on churches that convert refugees to Christianity and send them back home to proselytize.

Churches and NGOs, meanwhile, have their own private spy networks consisting of Chaoxianzu locals organized into several dozen cells. They raise the alert when senior military officers, prominent scholars and other VIP defectors show up in China. They also run safe houses and introduce refugees to the people smugglers who can move them onward. The battle is very real.

Early last year a prominent South Korean missionary and reputed refugee smuggler, the Rev. Kim Dong Shik, disappeared in Yanji. A South Korean official says he was kidnapped by Northern agents and "is being held against his will" by Pyongyang.

The Salvation Army

At the end of 1999, South Korean filmmaker Kim Yong-seung boarded a passenger train in Yanji. His companions were a 41-year-old North Korean woman and her teenage son, who had paid smugglers to ferry them out of China.

"No matter how dangerous it is, heaven will watch over us," the mother told the boy before departing. "If anything happens, son, you run."

The brokers arranging the pair's escape took on five additional clients in Shenyang. Together, with Kim discreetly filming, the contingent rail-hopped through Beijing, across the Yangtze River and into China's rugged southwest.

Kim's footage shows them riding trains, changing money on the black market, wielding fake ID cards at police checkpoints and waiting pensively as their van bounces toward the border. They entered "a Southeast Asian country" on Dec. 31, 1999, and all now live in South Korea.

What's apparent from Kim's documentary is that escapes cost money, involve guides, drivers and translators, require forged documents and entail at least one illegal border crossing. With numerous routes to choose from and conditions constantly changing, it follows that the Seoul Train is less a piece of infrastructure than a crew of talented fixers.

On the ground, missionaries now play a large role in the railroad, as do human-rights activists from Japan and South Korea, Buddhist groups and those friends and relatives of the refugees who happen to have money and connections. South Korean diplomats cannot provide aid openly for fear of disrupting relations with China and peace overtures toward the North. In other countries with less sensitive governments, they

can take in asylum-seekers (and in any case, all North Korean refugees are automatically eligible for South Korean citizenship). Funds come from the refugees themselves and from the activist groups helping them. The Tokyo-based nonprofit Life Funds for North Korean Refugees raises money from Japanese housewives and other donors for its foster-parent program in China and to help refugees flee. Other groups are little more than concerned individuals like Moon Kuk-han, a South Korean small businessman who has devoted himself to extracting a 16-member refugee family through his one-man foundation, Save the Kil Su Family.

Most of those who help smuggle refugees out of China do so for religious, humanitarian and political reasons. One activist, who uses the alias Mr. Parker, calls himself "a one-man Salvation Army." A retired aid-development professional who had a distinguished career in Africa and Asia, he assists a particular kind of refugee torture victims and witnesses. In doing so, he hopes to prove that China is violating its treaty obligations by repatriating North Koreans at clear risk of persecution. A natural skeptic, he once disbelieved the horror stories emanating from Pyongyang's gulags.

Now, he says, "it's so obvious to me that refugees should be protected, and that what China is doing is a crime."

Most activists feel the same way, and they hope to censure China for its conduct. The CNKR's secretary-general, former Seoul mayor Kim Sang-chul, confirms that his group funds a 30-member "voluntary services corps" composed of North Korean defectors who rescue refugees from China. Its director, former North Korean Army officer Kim Song-min, refuses to discuss its activities. "I'm free to talk about my past life, but not the present," he says. He is willing, however, to describe a New Year's Eve party held in his tiny Seoul apartment at which 16 defectors drank soju, sang songs and reminisced about home until they cried. Then they made a toast "Escalate the refugee crisis."

The Roads Out

With its expansive, sparsely populated borders and rugged terrain, Mongolia has become a favored destination among fleeing refugees. "It's the Casablanca of the North Korean refugee crisis," says Korean-American Pastor Douglas Shin, referring to the North African city that sheltered Jews fleeing Nazi Germany. Logistically, most crossings in this direction are variations on one theme refugees gather in a northeastern Chinese city, travel by car or van to the border and walk into the unbroken wilderness.

The worst obstacle is weather. One recent party braved a nighttime crossing at minus 47 Celsius during a blizzard so harsh that herds of yaks froze to death. In summer, refugees ford seasonal marshes or traverse the blistering Gobi Desert, relying on maps and their handlers' handheld Global Positioning System to navigate. "We crossed at night, crawling under barbed wire at the border," one escapee recalls. "We walked through reeds and muddy marshes thick with mosquitoes. At the designated point we were met by Mongolian Bible students, who fed us with a huge river fish." Missionaries, who have been active in Mongolia since the country democratized in the 1990s, pilot much of this passage. "Churches of our denomination get in touch from South Korea," says an evangelical Christian in Ulan Bator. "I tell them, 'I can't get [refugees] into Mongolia, but if they come, I can help them'." South Korean diplomats in Ulan Bator have more flexibility than those in other capitals a senior Mongolian official says that his country harbors a traditional "nomadic tolerance" for people on the move. "We're not like China," he says. "We don't send them back to North Korea." Still, there are limits. Shin was expelled after he leased a farm in eastern Mongolia and attempted to establish a sanctuary for refugees.

Farther north, in Siberia, as many as 10,000 North Koreans already live illegally in the Russian Far East. Most are lumberjacks exported by Pyongyang to work in guarded logging camps near Khabarovsk and Amur. Escapees, estimated to number in the hundreds each year, sometimes seek out a local activist named Kim Maria. They arrive on her doorstep asking for food and shelter; she arranges to slip the lucky ones onto flights to Seoul.

(Others continue by train to Moscow and approach the embassy there.) Once, she recalls, she smuggled a logger through a police cordon by "dressing him like a woman and telling the authorities that my daughter needed to visit a hospital." According to her, "there are many individuals like me helping North Koreans, but we don't communicate because of the danger."

Heading south, refugees enjoy less severe climates. But the greater distances increase the risk of detection. (Still the route is safer than trying to hop a ferry directly to South Korea, since Chinese police patrol the ports fairly strictly.) Typically defectors travel by rail as far as either Kunming or Nanning, accompanied by a Chaoxianzu guide, and then by bus or taxi to the border, where they either sneak across or present fake Chinese identity papers. From Nanning refugees proceed to Hanoi, where they are usually pushed along to Cambodia and eventually Thailand. From Kunming they can either cross south into Laos or east into Burma.

One refugee says he walked with three comrades overland into Laos, where they met "villagers with guns who started shooting at us." (The locals most likely thought they were Chinese smugglers.) Another refugee, a confident 32-year-old, led his group into northeastern Burma and encountered "more than 10" separate paramilitary groups, he says, some "armed with machine guns. Each time we'd beg them for guides. I gave my wristwatch, everything, to get their help." Refugees entering the Golden Triangle fear capture by the region's drug lords.

"Home" At Last

The Seoul train ends in a pine forest 75km south of its namesake city. The terminus a cozy re-education camp called Hanawon ("to unify"). Built three years ago to prepare newcomers for life in the South, the complex, which now holds 100 people, offers dorm rooms for singles and suites for families, and daily classes in computers and basic English. Volunteers, many of them nuns and college students, provide counseling and a range of other services-even lessons in how to order fast food and buy cosmetics. Despite the high walls and barbed wire, Hanawon feels most like a decompression chamber, not a prison. There adults learn to stop looking over their shoulders. Kids raised to keep silent and play indoors while in hiding storm from the cafeteria to join snowball fights. South Korea's newest citizens begin to plan their future. It was here, for example, that Ho, the onetime garbage picker, met his future wife after she arrived from Mongolia.

Hanawon "graduates" enter society with $30,000, a subsidized apartment and a one-year police tail (to guarantee they're not spies). Many, if not most, struggle to find a place in South Korean society. So many start eateries that the defector turned restaurateur has become a caricature. "They can have their cold-noodle shops, but people here don't expect any more from them than that," says Han Ki-Hong, director of the Network for North Korean Democracy and Human Rights. One defector who arrived from Moscow (he asks that his name not be used) took a job at a state-run company, but, lacking "school and hometown connections," couldn't advance. When the IMF crisis hit in 1997, he was forced to quit and hasn't found much work since. He survives on stipends from a Christian charity. "As an illegal resident, I never cried in Russia," he says. "But as a free citizen, I cry a lot in South Korea."

Refugees and their supporters tend to be more conservative than most South Koreans when it comes to relations with the North, and they blast President Kim Dae Jung's so-called sunshine policy of rapprochement with Pyongyang. They would rather the government block new investments in the North, demand human-rights concessions and press China diplomatically to end forced repatriations. They don't receive much satisfaction from the current administration. One of Kim's top aides insists that most refugees want jobs, not asylum, and that "true defectors" number just a few hundred.

Still, those who reach Seoul are the lucky ones. Parker's clients tell horror stories about what happens to those defectors who are caught by the Chinese and repatriated. Most were tortured merely for leaving their country. One 65-year-old grandmother says she was forced to assist after doctors administered a labor-inducing drug to women who came back from China pregnant. "As the first baby was born, the mother screamed for me to help," she says. "I cut the umbilical cord, wrapped the baby in a cloth and showed him to the mother. Then the doctor showed up, and shouted 'You old bitch! What do you think you are doing?' Then he came over, grabbed the child by one leg, and tossed him into the waste box. The second woman was eight months pregnant, and she also delivered a live child. I cut the umbilical cord, which was collected to make medicine, then I had to put the child in the box. The last four babies were born dead." (According to many refugees, North Korean officials zealously guard against any taint of foreign blood.)

Equally sad are those refugees trapped in China, where they live a shadow existence. The Choi family have already been deported from China once, in 1999. Their experience was typical. In North Korea, the parents were sent to one prison camp, their children to another. The father was shackled and beaten. The mother says she witnessed a forced abortion. Their son saw a friend kicked nearly to death because a guard didn't like his trendy haircut. The daughter, then 11, was forced to tend an elderly woman with dysentery. "My job was to slide a bowl underneath her, then clean up afterward," she says. Now back in China, the family survives on $25 a month and continues to suffer. Their 64-year-old patriarch has written a brief letter to the United Nations. "We North Korean refugees in China," it begins, "live worse than dogs in a mountain hut."

Until that changes, the Seoul Train will continue to rumble along. When he pioneered one of the earliest routes out of China, South Korean activist Ho Taeg Lee didn't have much luck. Back in 1997 he gathered 13 refugees and, on a shoestring budget, brought them along the now popular route to the Vietnamese border. The plan collapsed when group members were stopped before entering Vietnam. Turned back, they were prevented from re-entering China.

They bounced between the two checkpoints, were ejected at gunpoint into a minefield and, as the "Ping-Pong refugees," made headlines in Seoul.

Only a few years later, Ho has perfected his craft. At a recent late-night meeting in Seoul, he receives word about his latest expedition on his mobile phone "Eleven crossed into Mongolia this evening. All safe," he reports, confident in the knowledge that many more will follow.

With B. J. Lee in Seoul and Katharina Hesse in Beijing