

Crossing Over the Borderline of Death

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An outsider's view of Father as a prisoner in the Hungnam labor camp; this a survivor's account of life in the Tong Nee concentration camp at Hungnam. It is a corroboration by a non-Unification Church member to Father's testimony about his prison experience.



Among the prisoners, one man, Sun Myung Moon, stood out for his many unusual qualities. We were all dog tired when we returned from work; some of us leaned on one another or against a wall but he would always be sitting upright except for the few hours when he slept. He was such an exemplary prisoner that even the fanatical Communist jailers respected him. This was because he worked diligently and conscientiously without violating any prison rules or taking short breaks like the rest of us. He was in robust physical shape. While he was working, whenever we advised him to think of his health and take it easy, he always replied, "If I work even a little more and a little harder, will it not reduce my fellow workers' burden?"

He was sentenced to prison on a charge about on a par with being a "reactionary" and carrying with it a similar sentence.

At that time the quarreling Christian denominations were confusing the simple laypeople, and he sincerely believed that they had to be united. He began to develop the "Home Church" movement, insisting that true faith should start from the family. He preached that anyone can become a good Christian, even without attending a Sunday church service, as long as he always prays with a sincere heart and repents daily for his transgressions.

Soon his inspiring and convincing message had attracted many followers. The mainline Christian churches grew jealous however and plotted against him. His movement was insulted and labeled a heresy. That narrow-minded judgement of those mainline Christian groups played into the hands of the communists, who had a policy to destroy all religions. Eventually, he was arrested while in the middle of a meeting and sentenced to approximately three years in prison as one guilty of "disturbing the public order."

He always kept a calm composure and worked diligently without a word of complaint. As far as the work was concerned, nobody could compete with him for his strength and enthusiasm.

One thing about him which I found curious was that he never washed himself. Each day after we finished work at the fertilizer factory they allowed us to wash ourselves in the factory's waste water, but he just passed on by. Even though the water was polluted and almost unusable, all of us washed in it after work because our skin was unbearably sticky with a mixture of fertilizer dust, dirt and sweat.

One day I discovered how he was keeping himself clean. I woke up in the night and needed to use the latrine. It was very dark inside the cell. As I sat quietly waiting for my eyes to become accustomed to the darkness, I saw him sitting in a dimly lit corner.

"Kim? You woke up early," he said to me, opening his eyes. It seemed to me that he had been praying.

"I guess you wake up this early every day," I asked. "Aren't you tired?"

"It's alright," he said. "I'm used to it, and my body begins to itch if I try to sleep longer."

When I returned from the latrine, I saw him without a shirt, and he was washing himself with a wet towel that had been dipped in cold water.

"Mr. Moon, aren't you cold?" I asked, "I'm afraid you might catch a cold ... "

"At least I should do this since I don't wash myself at the factory," he replied. "In this way I can survive." I understood later that instead of using that polluted and almost unusable factory water, he saved his drinking water. With that he wet the towel and washed his whole body every day before dawn.

He would wake up, pray, wash with his cold, wet towel, and pray again. Then he would eat breakfast and go to work. He was certainly remarkable for his strong, indomitable body and spirit. It is rare enough for a man this close to death to continue to pay careful attention to his personal health, but that he would then sacrifice two hours from that most precious time for sleep in order to observe his religious rites was simply incredible to me.

There was a strange rumor that spread throughout the camp which everybody believed. It was said that Sun Myung Moon had a supernatural power. The fanatical communist guards would often, without reason, give a particularly hard time to those prisoners charged with being reactionaries or with disturbing the public order. But they would make an exception with Mr. Moon. I thought that was because he worked very conscientiously and never violated any of the rules. But a rumor had it that the communists dared not ill-treat him because they thought he had supernatural powers. It was said that if anyone mistreated him unreasonably, then at night an old man like Sansilyong, a feared guardian spirit of the mountain in Korean folklore, would appear in his dream and admonish him. If he were to mistreat him again, the old man would return the next night in his dream and punish him. Therefore, even the most malicious guard dared not trouble Mr. Moon.

Even more amazing, it was said that Sun Myung Moon himself would know the content of the dream. He would approach the guard who had bothered him on the previous day and question him about his dream in detail in order to confirm it, as if he had dreamt it himself. That was really something incredible! Yet Sun Myung Moon never mentioned any of these rumors. In any case, I myself saw a newly-arrived guard who mistreated him for a few days suddenly change his attitude. I believed that these rumors had some basis; hence I am recounting them.

I am neither a Unification Church member nor a Christian, neither in the past and nor at present, but I saw these things for myself. Although years and years have passed, I cannot forget the impression he made upon me. He was a man of vision and principles, one who was always true to his word.

Oh! I now recall that there was one promise which he has not kept. There is this matter of some toasted rice flour that I received from my mother. She used to send me enough flour to share with many other prisoners. Mr. Moon said that he would pay me back one pig for each bowlful of flour. But by my rough calculation, if I recall how many bowls of flour I shared with him, I think I should have received more than 100 cows. Until now, he has not paid me back even one pound of pork. This could, I suppose, be called an instance where he didn't keep his word!

Here I should like to explain for the reader who might not catch my point. At that time, there was a saying among the prisoners that one bean in prison was as valuable as one pig in outside society. That witty expression described the actual situation in the camp. Then let's imagine, if one bean in prison was worth a pig, how many cows would be equivalent to a bowlful of flour? It's a lot of cows! In other words, in that prison the heart to share food was appreciated more than anything else.

I did not hear about Mr. Moon for a long time after we departed from Hungnam. Whatever his life afterwards may have turned out to be, the mere fact that he and I were able to survive and come out from that living hell itself is a great blessing from Heaven.

According to Michael Breen, as recorded in the chapter notes in his book Sun Myung Moon – the Early Years 1920-53, Kim In-ho had been an anti-communist guerrilla at the time of his imprisonment in the labor camp (before Father was imprisoned there), and escaped to South Korea during the Korean War. He later became an intelligence officer involved in covert operations against the North.