

True Father's Release from Hungnam - 65 Years Ago Today

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The work and storage room at the Hungnam Labor Camp.

On October 14, 1950, True Father was released from Hungnam Labor Camp. True Father's ministry in Pyongyang ended on February 22, 1948, when he was arrested for a second time by North Korean officials. He was tried on April 7 and sentenced to five years of hard labor. On May 20, True Father was transferred from prison in Pyongyang to a labor camp in Hungnam, an industrial city on the east coast of North Korea. There he endured a hellish existence until liberated by advancing UN forces on October 14, 1950.

True Father's liberation by UN forces was by no means assured. As bombing of the Hungnam industrial complex became more intense, guards began executing prisoners, calling out their numbers starting with those having the longest sentences. In his autobiography, True Father notes, "The night before my scheduled execution the bombs fell like rain in the monsoon season ... so intense that it seemed all of Hungnam had been turned into a sea of fire. The high walls around the prison began to fall and the guards ran for their lives. Finally, the gate of the prison that had kept us in that place opened. At around two o'clock in the morning of the next day, I walked calmly out of Hungnam Prison with dignity."

True Father often spoke of his time at Hungnam, as a turning point in his life and in God's providence. In the Cheon Seong Gyeong, he says, "One memory continues to linger in my heart. When I was being taken to the labor camp in Hungnam, I had to trudge along a stream through a valley, chained to thieves. That memory is still so vivid. I cannot forget the time we walked along that winding path in the valley. It left a strong impression on me. Those steps were heading toward a different world. I really wondered, 'In the future, what paths will I have to walk each day? After serving my time in prison, what will I need to do? What should I do during my prison life?' It was going to be difficult, but I was ready to go there. Actually, that time was a good opportunity to come to a new realization about myself. That is why this memory stays with me." (CSG, 1004)

Even in the midst of death, True Father took every opportunity to be his best self in prison. In his

autobiography he shares, “My prisoner number was 596. People called me ‘Number five nine six.’ On nights when I couldn’t sleep, I would stare at the ceiling and repeat this number to myself over and over. If I said it quickly, it sounded very much like eo-gul, the Korean word used to describe the feeling of injustice. I truly had been imprisoned unjustly. The Communist Party initiated dok-bo-hoi, or gatherings where newspapers or other materials were read aloud, as a way of studying communist propaganda. Also, we had to write letters of gratitude to Kim Il Sung. The Security Detachment kept a close watch on our every move. Every day we were told to write letters of gratitude saying what we had learned, but I never wrote even a single page of these. We were supposed to write something like this: “Our Father Kim Il Sung, out of his love for us, gives us food to eat each day, gives us meals with meat, and lets us lead such a wonderful life. I am so grateful.” I could not write anything of the sort. Even if I were looking death in the face, I could not submit such letters to the atheistic Communist Party. Instead of writing them I worked ten times harder than the others in order to survive in the prison. The only way I could get away with not writing these letters was if I were the number one prisoner. Because of this effort I became the best prisoner and even received an award from a Communist Party official.” (As a Peace-Loving Global Citizen, 102)



Men working at the Hungnam Labor Camp

“Even while in prison I enjoyed taking whatever time I could find to talk with people. There were always people around me who wanted to listen to what I had to say. Even in the hunger and cold of prison life there was warmth in sharing with people with whom I had an affinity of heart. The relationships formed in Hungnam left me with twelve people who were both compatriots and as close as family to me, with whom I could spend the rest of my life. Among them was a famous minister who had served as president of the Association of Christian Churches in Korea’s five northern provinces. These were people with whom I shared intense emotions in situations where our lives were on the line, and this made them closer to me than my own flesh and blood.

Their being there gave my prison experience meaning.” (104)