

Hungnam Prison in the Snow (1)

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Photo date and location unknown

The most valued possession in prison after food was a needle and thread. Our clothes would wear out and be torn during the hard labor, but it was difficult to get a needle and thread to mend them. After a while prisoners began to look like beggars in rags. It was very important to mend the holes in our clothes in order to block, even a little, the cold winter winds. A small piece of cloth found lying on the road was extremely valuable. Even if the cloth were covered with cow dung, the prisoners would fight each other to try to pick it up. Once as I was carrying the bags of fertilizer I discovered a needle stuck in one of the bags. It must have been left there accidentally when the bag was made. From that time, on I became the seamster of Hungnam Prison. It was such a joy to find that needle. Every day I mended pants and knee breeches for other prisoners.

Even in the middle of winter it was so hot inside the fertilizer factory that we would sweat. So you can imagine how unbearable it was during the summer. Not even once, however, did I roll up my pants and let my shins show. Even during the hottest part of the summer I kept my pant legs tied in the traditional Korean fashion. Others would take off their pants and work in their underwear, but I kept myself properly dressed.

When we finished work our bodies would be covered with sweat and fertilizer dust, and most prisoners would take off their clothes and wash themselves in the filthy water that flowed from the factory. I, however, never washed myself where others could see my body. Instead, I would save half of the single

cup of water we were rationed each day, then get up early in the morning while the others still slept to wipe myself off with a small piece of cloth dipped in that half cup of water. I also used this time early in the morning to focus my spirit and pray. I considered my body to be precious, and I didn't want to casually expose it to others.

The prison cell held thirty-six people, and I took a small corner next to the toilet. In this space no one would step over me, but nobody wanted this space. We called it a toilet, but actually it was only a small earthenware jar without even a lid. Fluid would overflow from the toilet in the summer and it would freeze in the winter. There is no describing the putrid smell that came from it. The prisoners often experienced diarrhea because of the salty soup and hard rice balls that we ate every day.

I would be sitting by the toilet and hear someone say, "Oh, my stomach." The person would make his way to the toilet in quick short steps. As soon as he exposed his bottom, the diarrhea would come shooting out. Because I was next to the toilet I was often splashed. Even during the night, when everyone was asleep, sometimes someone would have abdominal pain. When I heard people yelping in pain as they were being stepped on, I would know that someone was making his way to the toilet and I would get up and press myself against the corner. And if I were asleep and did not hear him coming, I would suffer the consequences.

In order to endure this impossible situation, I even tried to think of these sights and sounds as some form of art.

Still I kept the spot by the toilet as my own during the entire time. "Why do you choose to stay there?" other prisoners would ask. I would answer, "This is where I feel most comfortable." I wasn't just saying this. This was, indeed, the place where my heart felt most at ease.