

The Hum Podcast

Episode 1: "I Came For Light"

[Theme music fades in]

Enoch: When I was in North Korea, I wanted to have full, I wanted to have whatever I want, but when I was really in China, and I realized I came for lights, not for hunger or not the persecution, I came for light. I wanted to see some bright world.

[Music increases in volume]

Speaker: You're listening to The Hum.

[Music fades out]

Amar: So Enoch, you were telling us before we got started about the lights across the river. Can you describe that for us again?

Enoch: Oh yeah. Because most people, they think North Koreans are escaping, or they leave North Korea because of hunger or political persecution. So most people think of that, but besides that one that there's another one, that's what I realized so far, is that people leave North Korea because of the lights, because most defectors are from the border area because they see the bright lights every single night from China. So China is so close, but that's the country never attempt to cross and never attempt to go. But a few brave people, they did. That's the defectors now. So they actually crossed the river for the bright lights. It could be literally lights because there was no electricity in North Korea. Even there is, it's a couple of hours per day or not at all for a whole week. So also in metaphor, people wanted free bright life. Maybe they wanted to see a bright wide world. So I take it that's right. That's the other reason.

Gilad: And we're sitting here today with Enoch from North Korea, a North Korean refugee now living in Toronto.

Amar: So yeah, thanks so much for being here and talking to us. I'm very curious about what your sort of earliest memories of North Korea are. Can you talk a little bit about before the decision to move, how you felt about the regime there? What life was like there? What's it like to actually look back at that time in your life?

Enoch: Well, early teenager life I thought that North Korea is the best country in the world, which controls all over the world, and we have missiles and nuclear bombs. So because we are the strongest one in the world. But later on when I found out, because people are so brainwashed this before they were born. Until high school, before I graduated high school, I was still loyal to government or the regime. But around 17 or 18 years old, I realized that the regime sucks and then that's, I mean-

Gilad: Sucks how? In what way? Like man, these people suck.

Enoch: Yeah. The North Koreans are nice, but the whole ... every single day, like when I was 17 or 18 or before that, 15, which teenager shouldn't worry about, I worried about I wish there was no tomorrow. I wish it was ended just today. The world ends just today, because I didn't want tomorrow. Because another day, tomorrow, right after tomorrow, every single day it's hardships come in, and then it multiplies more and more every single, every life, every single day it's fucking horrible living in North Korea.

Gilad: So you're 17, and you're feeling like, "Oh my God, I hate it here. These people ... it sucks." Like what? The country sucks. The government sucks.

Enoch: The government sucks, but I didn't realize that until I was 18 or 17.

Gilad: And okay, so I'm going to tell you myself, if I'm ever going through any sort of problem in my life, it's like everybody knows. It's like, "I went on a date." And I have to tell everybody. Or like I'm having hardship and everybody knows. But in North Korea, right, you realize you wake up, and you're like, "You know what? I hate it here. It sucks." Are you able to talk to people?

Enoch: But you cannot say that out loud because-

Gilad: Not tell your family?

Enoch: Not even family, because family as the people you will never have to trust because they will sue them actually. They will sue ... if I said that, they will sue me.

Gilad: Do you mean by sue, they'll go tell the police?

Enoch: Yep. The family would have said, "Don't say like that." But if the other people heard that what I said that I really hate this fucking regime, and they're probably push him into the jail without a reason. I was very shocked that when I was in South Korea that people were like, "Horrible president ever we had so far away."

They were like, "Wow! You can say that actually out loud? Wow! Come on brother, you're funny." My friends asked me like that.

Amar: See, that's crazy though to me because we take it very seriously that we have the right to basically talk shit about all of our leaders, right. In fact, I would say that that's probably what I spend 95% of my time doing, and it gets quite annoying for everybody. I know and I'm sorry about that, but I think we all kind of, we can intellectualize what it's like to have all these thoughts, but thinking about what it's like to actually not being able to freely express yourself like that is mind blowing to me. Can you tell us when you decided, "Okay, I'm done. I'm leaving." When did that hit you?

Enoch: It was exactly 2006.

Gilad: And you're 17?

Enoch: No, I was 19.

Gilad: You're 19.

Enoch: Because right after high school, because I realized the world is really fucked up, North Korea, and I got a phone call from China that my mom's alive, because I haven't seen her for almost 10 years.

Gilad: What?

Enoch: She left when I was 10, so that it was around 1996, I think '7, when the famine got started in North Korea. And a lot of people really died from starvation.

Gilad: And do you remember-

Enoch: Absolutely.

Gilad: -seeing people starving?

Enoch: If someone asks me, "What's your early life? What's your early memories in North Korea?" I will say that death from starving, and public political execution, and less education.

Gilad: You remember seeing public executions?

Enoch: Oh, I've been seeing many.

Gilad: How many did you see?

Enoch: I've seen, the very first one was when I was, I think, 9 or 10. No, I was 12 because my mom left when I was 10, because I also saw that the people who sold my mom to China, because my mum was human trafficked or something. Is that what you call in English?

Amar: Yeah, absolutely.

Enoch: Human trafficking. So, yeah, they don't care whether it's kids there. The government want the people to see all of us.

Amar: And what was the method of execution that you saw? Did they sort of-

Enoch: They use AK-47.

Amar: Right, so it's a mass shooting almost in public?

Enoch: They shoot them all. What is that? It has 30 bullets, they shoot them all actually. Later on after the execution, you actually hardly find the body shapes.

Gilad: They're just so mutilated.

Enoch: Yeah. It's pieced away. But I saw that when I was still a kid, because the government they want to see all of us.

Amar: And at the time when you're seeing this, does it feel like it's fucked up then, or is it just fucked up now that you look back at it?

Enoch: At that time when I saw that, I realized that, oh my God, I should never betray the country and then never commit a crime like that. Yeah, but later on when I was 18 or 19, I realized this is really fucked up country and I should leave. And at that time I got a phone call from China, mom's alive and my mom asked me to come over. So I say yes. Why not? I was like ... to decide to cross the river is like you are so ready to die because I was so ready to die. That's what I did. I think a few people did. We had North Korean defectors right across from North Korea when they arrived in China. And what they do is purchasing kind of poisons because that's when they get caught to commit suicide because they don't want to go back to North Korea.

Amar: So you really got to the point where crossing over or death were both better than continuing your life in North Korea?

Enoch: Because I left my father and my grandmother and my rest of my families in North Korea. I left North Korea without saying a word. So I felt so horrible. I still have guilty about that. I still have nightmares about that. I'm saying I'm really

fucking sorry that there was the choice I had made. So at the time I prepared it for six months I think to leave, to escape North Korea. *[Theme music fades in]* And every single day while I was preparing to leave it was ... I felt like I'm in hell.

[Korean speech plays over music, then speech and music fade out]

Amar: Tell us about the actual physical journey.

Enoch: Well, I got the phone call in April, and then I decided to leave the North Korea right away. But when I actually arrived at the Tumen River, I couldn't go further step because suddenly the [inaudible], my family, my grandma, because after today I want to see them like once before I die, right. So I couldn't just leave them. So I went back to my home and kind of, I don't know, I was so in misery those times. And in November, I finally decide and I was so ready to die because for all those, from April to November, I was preparing not to cross the river, not to go to South Korea, not to go down there because I was prepared to die for six months because the ... so that if I didn't have that kind of courageous. I wasn't that brave. If I wasn't that, I couldn't make it.

Amar: So when you finally decided to do it, what's the river like? Tell us what's the temperature like, how deep is the water? Describe that for us please.

Enoch: Oh yeah, sure. Because it was November, in North Korean November is freaking cold, really. People say is that Toronto, winter is so horrible, but you guys have Canada Goose or Moose Knuckles. I have one. I paid \$800 for that.

Gilad: But they don't have, I'm guessing, they don't have Canada Goose in North Korea.

Enoch: Or it's out of your budget, way out of your budget.

Gilad: It's slightly expensive.

Enoch: To get a Canadian Goose or Canada Goose or Moose Knuckle, you have to work for your rest of your life to get that. Yeah, so there was a pretty warm jacket in my family, but we share them, my dad and me, whoever goes outside, we share that. But I just left them for my dad, because if I took it, my dad and my whole family doesn't have the warm jacket for winter. So I just took summer jacket and I went into the Tumen River. It was freaking cold. I never had that kind of freezing in life. And the Tumen River was about to be my chest in November. And then when I finally crossed the river, I felt literally nothing on my skin, because I had to be naked because after crossing I had to put them on again. So I literally felt nothing. And then, I was led to a random Chinese house, and it was kind of a church and I made another phone call with my mom, and then I prepared to leave.

Gilad: So "jayu" means freedom in Korean, and our roots started in North Korean human rights awareness. So from 2012 to 2013, that's all we focused on. And that all happened when I took a trip to North Korea in 2008. I was fortunate to be able to go to a city called Kaesong, which is the second largest city. It's funny because after I met other North Koreans, I'm like, "Have you been to Kaesong?" And everyone's like, "I've never been anywhere outside of my city."

Enoch: Most people in North Korea, they born where they were born and they die there, because North Korea has horrible transportation system, because I never went outside of my city for 19 years. And Pyongyang, it was another country because China was closer than Pyongyang and easy to cross. But to visit Pyongyang, we need to have special visa to get in there, because Pyongyang is totally different country, I mean different ... It's kind of, when I watched the movie *The Hunger Game*, it was the capital city. Pyongyang was the capital city. Yeah, and then-

Amar: Well, I was actually going to ask, first I'm really curious about how you two, Gilad and Enoch, actually became friends because that's why we're actually able to do this interview with you.

Enoch: We're not friends.

Amar: Nobody's ever really friends with Gilad. He just kind of uses you for things until he gets his help. But Gilad, I want to ask you, JAYU is how we met. I'm a filmmaker. You run a film festival. It's a human rights film festival, but the roots were in North Korean human rights. Why North Korea? What is it that spoke to you? What made you get into this?

Gilad: So it goes back to that trip. So I'm in South Korea teaching English and I'm bored, and there's a trip available to go to North Korea. And I've always considered myself a social activist or human rights guy, but I didn't take that trip because I was like, "I need to go there and study the human rights." It was being able to say that I've been to the moon, being able to go to North Korea. So I took that trip so I could come back and brag, and I'll be honest about that. And I'm on that trip and a lot of what Enoch is saying rings true. It's like I'm there and I'm realizing this is like some weird time portal. It did look like a place stuck in the 70s and all of my-

Amar: And this is despite the fact that you're in a place that's designed for foreigners. They've set this place up for people like you to come and see North Korea. Right?

Gilad: Right, yeah. The whole point of this trip is to show us how great North Korea is. Everything is so over the top. It's like when we had lunch, it was like I had like 100 side dishes to myself as if to be like, "No one here is starving. See, we've got all this food." So that's the irony in all this, is that North Korea tried to show me

how great it was, and I left actually feeling a lot more confused than clear-minded. And I mean some bizarre things happened while I'm there, and I don't think we have time to go into all of them. Maybe we could do a future episode called Gilad's Field Day in North Korea, but I remember my interactions. I met a North Korean and he had never heard of Toronto. And they were really tight restrictions on what we could do and what we couldn't do. And so I go back to South Korea after all this and I basically Googled, what the heck is North Korea? And what I learned horrified me and it embarrassed me on two levels. One, as a human rights guy to not know what was going on there. But on a second more personal level, I come from a Jewish background, right. And my grandparents on both sides grew up in Romania. They dealt with communism. They've dealt with things like concentration camps and the Holocaust. And these are things that are still happening today. There are concentration camps in North Korea holding an estimated 80,000 to 200,000 people, right Enoch?

Enoch: Yeah.

Gilad: Yeah. And for me to not know that that existed today, it humiliated me. Long story short, it became my mission to tell as many people as I could. I became obsessed. North Korea is all I talked about. And so I sort of realized that film and art was the best way to raise awareness of all that, and I met Enoch along the way.

Amar: So Enoch, briefly tell us about what South Korea was like very quickly, but then tell us about how you arrived in Canada, and what led to that decision.

Enoch: Well, I will never forget that feeling that I had, its first impression about South Korea. People were nice at first time, and they were interested in North Koreans because they've never met before. But later on I found that some kind of discriminations, school, workplace, and others. The whole society was not ready to accept North Koreans in South Korea. That's what I realized, especially trainees, which is the future of the South Korea. And while I was in South Korea, I studied a bit, pretty much hard, and I got into university. And then I was just studying landscape architecture because I thought South Korea was so beautiful because the landscape was really good. I thought that the landscape is the face of a country, so I decided to learn landscape. And I bumped into barrier that's called English. I was stuck in there. I couldn't go further. And while I was studying in university, my eyes were opened a little wider, and I found out South Korean students were not interested in North Koreans at all or a bit. So I decided to raise awareness about North Korean human rights. But the very first problem was English. So I decided to go abroad to learn English and to come ... So I chose Canada to come, but to come to Canada legally, it costs a lot but I had no support for that, because usually South Korean students, like international students, they got support from their parents, but I got no support from South

Korea. So I didn't know there was that illegal, I mean, hiding my identification, South Korean identification and coming to Canada, but I had to. There was no choice. But especially, the South Korean trainees, they usually easily get influenced by developed countries such as the US or Canada if something happens. And then, I thought that I should start this activity in developed countries, US or England or Canada. So I chose Canada to come and I studied English, and also to raise the North Korean human rights.

Amar: And so you've been in Canada for how long now?

Enoch: A span of five years, I think.

Amar: And when you came here you spoke no English whatsoever?

Enoch: Not at all. All I knew was a hello.

Amar: That's insane, because your English is clearly better than both of ours already. So that's kind of embarrassing for Gilad and me. But also five years is not that long a time. What's it feel like in Toronto now? Do you feel like you're sort of becoming more Canadian? What is your status like? How long was it before you started to feel like a part of this society, or comfortable at least?

Enoch: I would never ever forget that it's March 23rd to when I got into Canada. Wow! I felt like I am home in North Korea. I never had that kind of comfortable comfort before when I was in South Korea. So when it was-

Gilad: I wonder if that's the first time anyone's ever compared North Korea and Canada?

Enoch: Oh yeah. When I was at the Pearson Airport I was like, "Wow! This is the land where I am going to be buried." That's what I thought. I still want that. I want to be buried in Canada.

Gilad: So you get here, right?

Enoch: Yeah.

Gilad: And from what I understand, you get here, and you're not the only North Korean here. There's like what, thousands?

Enoch: There were, yeah, approximately 2000 people, North Koreans, but now, it was a couple of years ago, but now I think it's less than 100 or some maximum 70 or 50 left.

Amar: So what's the story? Gilad, you know a lot about this. Can you tell me the story behind that? Because as you know I'm a Toronto guy, I don't know anything about this. So Toronto was, from what I understand, outside of South Korea, the number one destination. And the highest population of North Korean defectors was in Toronto, outside of South Korea, but that's changed dramatically. Why? What happened?

Gilad: So I think what you find is a lot of North Koreans, and like Enoch was talking about wanting to learn English, but it's even like their stigma and discrimination, and a lot of North Koreans end up in South Korea and they're finding that it's hard, right?

Amar: Yeah.

Gilad: It's hard to find work. It's hard to adjust. People discriminate against North Koreans. And so North Koreans sort of found this loophole here in Canada where they could come here with a fake name and sort of a fake identity, and they would get printed by the Canadian government. They print all refugees, but for some reason Canada was the only country, or one of the only countries, that wasn't sending those prints back to South Korea. So North Koreans would get here, and Canada would never do fact checking. So all of a sudden this loophole is discovered, and the population starts to balloon, and then someone takes notice and they're like, "Wait a second, there's a lot of North Koreans here. What's going on?" And so they start to do their homework, and they decide to send those prints back to South Korea. And I think what I heard was it was something like a 99% match of the North Korean prints that were here in Canada, matched the records in South Korea, meaning that they had already been in South Korea and had already settled there. So the government finds out and what happens?

Enoch: When the government finds out and then they released the deportation orders or to vacate the refugee status. So one my friend, I mean, many of my friends got the letter that the government says, "We are going to vacate your permanent resident status, and your refugee status as well."

Amar: They're going to vacate their status?

Enoch: Vacate, that's what it was. That's the words that was on the letter.

Amar: So that's not a deportation order necessarily, but it's-

Enoch: That's the same as a deportation order because when we apply for trial or as a court, then they're going to give us deportation order. It just same shit but different words.

Amar: Why, see, this is the thing that drives me nuts about the kind of-

Gilad: There are a lot of things that drive you nuts.

Amar: Yes, definitely. And this is where Amar goes on his little diatribe, but was there any evidence that these 2000 North Koreans that were living in Toronto were being harmful to Canadian society? Why suddenly change the rules? And what is the harm in people coming to Canada looking for a better life through these sorts of loopholes? I mean obviously we want the best-case scenario, the ideal scenario would be that people kind of do these things by the book, but when you're a refugee, the book isn't always that helpful, and it's not easy to get identification and things like that. So this is the thing that kind of drives me nuts. And I guess how many North Koreans, how many people like you do you think are left in Toronto right now?

Enoch: I think it's less than 50 or 70. And among that people, half of them are trying to labor, but they just can't because at least they need to earn some money to settle down in South Korea again. So most likely the 2000 people, the government messed up though their lives, because for me, unlike most available already trainees, I spend early trainees in Canada, and then I'm so ready to pay back to Canadian government or to Canada because I'm studying architecture in college. And then, a couple of years later I will be paying taxes, I mean definitely. So I wish Canadian government has some kind of mercy to people who are left, who are really dying to stay in Canada, just 50. And because recently, a couple days ago my friend got the deportation order letter, but he has three kids, citizen kids in Canada. But the parents got the letter. Parents are permanent resident.

Amar: How do you think we can sort of help the people of North Korea kind of see things outside of the world that has been created for them? Can the media do more? Can we do more through art and through activism? What are some of the things that you would like us to do that you think could help people back in North Korea?

Enoch: North Korea, it's worse than what people think because of the situation in North Korea, but what I found out was North Korea is being changed so quickly from 20s, because usually the older generations are so brainwashed that ... even younger one was brainwashed as well, but through outside USB or CD players, the movies and Wikipedia informations about outside ... even when I was in North Korea, I didn't even know about the Canada is. So yeah, USB movies when they're kind of informations on, it's not imported, it's smuggled to North Korea. And the early trainees will be changed, and the whole society will be changed. I think by now they already know what the outside of the world is, but the thing is the government threats, the pressure is too much, I mean, dangerous and

higher, so they don't even try to attempt to commit to break down the fear the government presses. You got what I'm saying?

Gilad: Yeah, absolutely. And I know that you touched upon things are changing, and I know that when you were living in South Korea, oh sorry, North Korea, a lot of DVDs were being smuggled in or CDs, right? And then I know that there's a lot of power outages there. And then what would ... tell me what happens if you're watching a DVD in your house and the power goes out.

Enoch: That's like, if it's serious, you're going to go for lifetime jail for day.

Gilad: So if you're watching South Korean drama in your house-

Enoch: Yeah. South Korean drama as, and also the US drama, the videos, or the Wikipedia things. So when I was there, every other households had this CD players, the video players, but there are no electricity in North Korea. A few households, they use batteries, car batteries. So they watch a movie if the movie is a really good one or the information is really good or the music videos or some kind of that. So when the power goes out, the government hits the households randomly, and then they open the ... they'll almost break the CD player and-

Gilad: Because the disks are stuck in there.

Enoch: Because disk is stuck in there, because when the power goes out, so you cannot take it out. You can't actually get a part it away and that the player, and then you can take it out. So the government just hits the households and then break into, and then they just took the CD. And if it's South Korean or either US or South Korean movies or Wikipedia things or music video or something against the government regime, and that they-

Gilad: Which seems to be anything.

Enoch: Yeah. So they are taking the whole family away from home, and then putting in jail.

Gilad: So it seems like with the USB keys now going in, it's a bit safer.

Enoch: When I talked to my dad, and I asked my dad, "Dad, is there USB players in North Korea?" He was, "Yeah, there are a few USB players." So USB is like, as people know, it's really tiny and easily to get rid of, right. So even the power goes out, so people can hide it easily.

Amar: Tell me really quickly, how do you communicate with your dad if he's still in North Korea?

Enoch: Oh, well if I had money, I will contact a broker first who is in South Korea that I can find them, one of them, and then they contact the China, and the China contact to North Korea, and then I wait for it. I wait for their response, and then I call them.

Amar: So these people do this for money. It's a way for them to get money, the brokers. They're kind of facilitating you talking to your family?

Enoch: Yeah.

Amar: Well I mean, listen, we're pretty much at the end of our time here. I feel like both of us could talk to you forever, but I just want to say thank you so much for coming by. North Korea is not a subject that I know a lot about. I never thought I'd say this, but Gilad, I learned a lot from you today as well. That's a new one, but Enoch to me, you're like a perfect example, man, of why this country needs a more open and more inclusive refugee and immigration policy. I have no doubt that you're going to contribute incredible things to this country, and that you're going to make your homeland proud for all the activism and human rights work that you do. So you're a prime example of how we could be doing things a lot better when it comes to immigration policy. So I sincerely thank you for stopping by man.

Gilad: And I want to say, you leave North Korea in search of that light, right? You go to China in search of that light, and you get and you realize that that's not the light you wanted. And then you get to South Korea, and you're hoping that that's the light and it's not. And then you get here and it's still not the light.

Enoch: In Canada, I found that one.

Gilad: You did?

[Theme music fades in]

Enoch: Yeah. Canada is where I can open my dream here. That's what I realized.

Gilad: We hope you get to stay, Enoch.

Enoch: Yeah.

[Music increases in volume then fades out]