

Ann Shin:

So, the fight for freedom is important to be a part of. Whether you're living in Toronto or in North Korea, it's our responsibility to be vigilant about, are we living free lives? Are those around us, those we know about, are they able to live free lives?

Gilad Cohen:

You're listening to The Hum. We're so fortunate to be joined here today by Ann Shin, a Toronto-based documentary filmmaker, poet, and author. Her debut novel, *The Last Exiles*, was released this year and focuses on the love story of two North Koreans who come to the realization that life may be better outside of North Korea.

Gilad Cohen:

She's also the director of *The Defector*, a film that was released back in 2013, which won numerous awards and focuses on the challenging journey of North Korean defectors escaping into China. And if that's not enough, her newest film *Artificial Immortality* came out this year and recently had its world premier as the opening night film at the Hot Docs International Documentary Film Festival. And we're so happy to have you here today. How are you?

Ann Shin:

Oh, I'm well. I'm so happy to be on The Hum podcast. Thanks for having me on. It's a privilege.

Gilad Cohen:

Yeah, it's a privilege to have you here. I mean, we were talking earlier before we even hit record that we've known each other now for 10 years. You were part of our first annual Human Rights Film Festival, which was the North Korean Human Rights Film Festival. So, it's great to have you here with us today.

Gilad Cohen:

As we mentioned in the intro, you just released a book, it's your first fiction novel, earlier this year called *The Last Exiles*. You've also directed a documentary which was released back in 2013 called *The Defector*.

Gilad Cohen:

Now, both are centered on North Korean Human Rights, and even more specifically, the journeys of North Korean refugees. I'm curious for you personally, where did your interest in North Korea start?

Ann Shin:

I'm of South Korean background, but my family straddled the border during the Korean War. So, before the Korean War, Korea was just one country, but during the Korean war, the country got divided. My aunt and uncle were right on the front lines. And so, they were socialists who were seen as Northern sympathizers.

Ann Shin:

By the time the Southern forces had taken over the territory where they lived in, they were still seen as socialists. And so, they were tortured and imprisoned and my uncle died in prison. The division of North and South Korea really affected my family as it did many, many families.

Ann Shin:

When I first learned that there were North Korean defectors here in Canada and in Toronto, I wanted to meet them and just hear more about their journey because so much of our common history was annexed after the Korean War ended. And I wanted to find out more about how life has been for them. That's how my interest in the North Korean defectors began.

Gilad Cohen:

That's really fascinating. And we have a whole part later on in this interview where we will actually talk about North Korean defectors here in Toronto, because I know that that situation has evolved quite a bit since I first met you 10 years ago.

Gilad Cohen:

China plays a huge role in North Korea. And also in, let's say, the struggles or the journeys of North Korean refugees. Beyond helping prop up the North Korean regime with financial support, can you tell us a little bit more about the journeys that most North Koreans have to take to escape from North Korea and the challenges that they face in China as a result of China's relationship to North Korea?

Ann Shin:

North Korea is sandwiched on the south by the border to South Korea and on the north with this border to China and also Russia. And so, anyone who wants to escape, those are the borders that they are contending with.

Ann Shin:

Now, the border to the south is really heavily militarized. It's called the de-militarization zone. It's a very Orwellian oxymoron. Heavily militarized and guarded. It's really hard to escape via the southern border, which is a shame because South Korea has an open door policy for all North Korean refugees. Not only do they receive them with open arms, but they have stipends, and welfare, and training programs for North Korean refugees.

Ann Shin:

So, most North Koreans look to the north where the border with China or Russia. And the reason why a lot of them will go into China is because there is an ethnic community of Chinese Koreans or Korean Chinese living in that part of China.

Ann Shin:

And historically, there was a lot of back and forth movement across the border. North Koreans would go to China to work for a season and come back with money or food to bring back to their family. But since the crackdown on the borders back in the two thousands and into the two thousand and tens, all that kind of movement was stopped.

Ann Shin:

What North Koreans who want to defect face now if they want to escape is they have to escape through China or Russia. And most of them choose China, but because China has diplomatic relations with North

Korea, if they find any undocumented North Koreans in their country, they repatriate them back to North Korea.

Ann Shin:

Anyone who's repatriated and caught, having been caught for defecting is thrown into a prison camp and tortured, possibly they face execution, their family face repercussions as well. So, it's high, high stakes for any North Korean who gets caught in China.

Ann Shin:

And yet many do try to go through China to escape. And what they're trying to do is they want to get to China and escape to a third country, beyond Chinese borders, where they can apply for safe asylum.

Gilad Cohen:

And we're not talking about a country here the size of Ajax, we're talking about China, a massive country that's really difficult to navigate through, right? Can you maybe go into a little bit more detail about that journey through China?

Gilad Cohen:

Some people equate it with it being like an underground railroad for North Koreans to have to travel through. And then going back to the North Korean refugees in China, what sort of challenges do North Korean women face specifically when they're in China?

Ann Shin:

When a North Korean wants to escape through China, they first have to ford a river. Many don't even know how to swim, but it gets very narrow in parts, and if they can get across some parts of the river, you can wait across up to neck level or whatever, depending on the season.

Ann Shin:

Then they hit barren country, some farmland, some small towns, and they have to rely on either brokers who are basically human smugglers who will guide North Korean defectors for a fee, or missionaries or NGOs.

Ann Shin:

There are quite a few different organizations and individuals who are helping North Korean defectors even as we speak. And they form an underground railroad that's alive and working today and helping North Koreans find safe asylum, safe passage to third countries.

Ann Shin:

There's a network of these people in China and other countries. And so, if a North Korean defector is lucky, they'll be able to meet them or connect with them and get help to get out of China safely. Because while they're in China, they're at risk of being caught and deported back to North Korea at any given moment.

Ann Shin:

For North Korean women, there are specific risks that are heart-rendering to learn about. A lot of North Korean women are trafficked into China and sold into either brothels or to do sex work, whether it's online or phone sex work, or working in clubs, or karaoke houses.

Ann Shin:

Secondly, they're also sold as brides into families. And for a while there, there's been a big gender disparity between males and females in China because of their one child policy. And because of the lack of females, there was a high demand for women.

Ann Shin:

And so, North Korean women were trafficked to Chinese families. And some of them were treated like slaves, but others were treated like daughters-in-law or wives. So, every North Korean woman has a different experience. All of them are trafficked unwillingly, but some families have treated the women and the children well and others it's been awful existence being like a sex slave within that household.

Taylah Harris-Mungo:

In your film, *The Defector*, the film follows a broker or smuggler named Dragon, who, as you said, brokers, they help folks from North Korea cross the border between North Korea and China. What was it like for you developing that relationship with Dragon as well as some of the refugees?

Ann Shin:

There are a lot of brokers or human smugglers that ferry goods and people across borders. In the North Korean situation, these brokers will guide North Koreans through China for a fee.

Ann Shin:

I had met Dragon, that's the nickname for this guy. He wore a shell suit, you know one of those tracksuits that are shiny and make a lot of noise? And he had three cell phones and I was like, "God, I don't think I can trust this guy. I can't trust anyone with more than one cell phone, let alone three." And yet he was really sharp.

Ann Shin:

And he talked about the risks that North Korean defectors face. I had met a couple defectors in Canada who had been helped by him to find their way safely through to become refugees in Canada. And so, I knew that he knew his stuff. And so Dragon, when I met him, at first I was like, "I'm not sure about whether I want to hitch my wagon to this guy," but after I'd talked with him a couple more times and other defectors who had been helped by him, I realized he knows what he's doing.

Ann Shin:

And he's a really interesting person and character to think about because there are smugglers around the world, human smugglers, and they fulfill a role that governments and NGOs don't. A lot of refugee claimants or people fleeing their countries are desperate enough to pay guides to help them out of their country.

Ann Shin:

If governments and NGOs were responding to this, there would be no need for human smugglers to work with these people. But because there is a gap where governments and NGOs are not stepping up, there are these human smugglers out there. And it was really illuminating for me to work with Dragon and meet the defectors that he was meeting, because he knew how to work around the system.

Ann Shin:

In that way, I was concerned because he is a guy who breaks laws, right? On the other hand, he's helping these defectors. And so, I was in this uneasy relationship with him. And through him, I met with a group of defectors who were wanting to escape from North Korea. He helped them out of North Korea. They made it across the river and we met in a farmhouse just in the part of China that is close to the border of North Korea.

Ann Shin:

And it was this farmhouse. There was bleached grass flattened and frozen on the grounds. And we were inside this little farmhouse that had radiant floor heating. It's coal heating, the coal smoke gets channeled under the floor and we're sitting there.

Ann Shin:

And they had just arrived and they were wary of me that here I am, this filmmaker, why would they want to talk to me when they're just trying to escape with their lives? But we all sat down to bowls of Kanji.

Ann Shin:

And I don't know about you, but a meal will break the ice with anyone you meet. And it certainly did that with the North Korean defectors I met. We sat around and I shared my story and they shared their stories with me.

Ann Shin:

And as they were speaking and they understood where I was coming from, they told me they really wanted their stories told. I started to film with them. I was embedded with them for their entire journey into Southeast Asia.

Taylah Harris-Mungo:

What was it like for you to document such intimate and often terrifying moments for folks when you can't even be sure that folks are going to make it safely? What was that like to be a part of that process?

Ann Shin:

It was really nerve-racking. It was scary to be traveling with these defectors, undercover in China. The stakes were so high. We had heard several weeks ago, there was a minivan with five defectors. They had been caught and detained and then deported back to North Korea.

Ann Shin:

We were traveling, sometimes in a minivan, sometimes on buses and sometimes on trains. If any of them got caught, they would have been deported back to North Korea. So, those stakes were really high.

And if I was caught with them, I would have been seen as aiding and abetting the defectors and so I was concerned about that as well.

Ann Shin:

We were on buses and having to not speak. We would just look at each other and trust that Dragon knew where we were supposed to get off. Because if we spoke, we'd reveal that we didn't speak Mandarin, that we weren't from their country. So, we were always in public really, really worried and scared.

Ann Shin:

And then there were these safe houses that was set up. So, there'd be these apartments that we'd go into. And all the apartments and all the streets in China have CCTV cameras everywhere. Like a parking lot in China will have 20 CCTV cameras.

Ann Shin:

He would tell us, "Oh, it should just be the three of you that walk in and the rest of us wait." And then, "Okay, now us three will walk in." So, there was always a sense of constant surveillance and yet Dragon knew whether or not that surveillance would matter.

Ann Shin:

On a train, there may be a conductor that would come and ask for ID, but he knew from his colleagues when they're not likely to check for ID. And so, there was always a sense of having to evade authorities in plain daylight. That was nerve-wracking for me.

Ann Shin:

But at the same time, it was amazing to have that time to talk with them. Just sitting around in the safe houses, we were able to share Ramen noodles and just hear about each other's parents or grandmothers or the families and how each of them really missed their hometowns and were hoping that they would be able to, one, bring their family out, or two, go back if things change in North Korea. A lot of them just wanted to be able to go back to their hometowns.

Gilad Cohen:

I can't imagine just the nerves on your mind, walking around and having to navigate through a process like that. And I feel like at least you had a guy named Dragon with three cell phones who could help you navigate. If there's someone to trust in that situation, I suppose it is a man named Dragon with three cell phones.

Gilad Cohen:

You talked a little bit about the challenges in being along for that journey. CCTV surveillance, conductors who may be coming up to ID you, but I also imagine the process of making a documentary based on refugees escaping from North Korean into China isn't the same as, let's say, making a documentary about bus drivers in Toronto.

Gilad Cohen:

I'm curious, the process of actually making the films, like hard drives and cameras, can you guide us through some of the unique challenges you faced and how present you could be as a filmmaker?

Ann Shin:

When you're doing a documentary of this sort, when you're going embedded in a situation where it's not legal, there's so much pre-planning that has to be done. Everything from the gear to who you're working with and who the crew is.

Ann Shin:

In terms of gear, we chose to work with SLR Cameras. At the time, we were working with Canon 4Ds and 5DS, because they look just like a tourist's camera. So, we worked with that and we knew that we had to keep our drives hidden in various places because we were afraid of hard drives being searched or being confiscated.

Ann Shin:

We kept a set of dummy drives, where we had a bunch of touristy footage that we uploaded to it. Then me and the cameramen, we divided the real drives and kept them hidden in our luggage. When we came to a certain part of the journey where we're losing the Chinese sound man, we had him go back and FedEx the footage that we had collected that far. So, we had a copy of that.

Ann Shin:

So, we were constantly having two copies. And at that point we had three copies, I think. He sent that drive off to Canada once he got back to his home city and could just send it by courier. We had to also be careful about audio. You want to use Lavalier Mics and you want to use a proper Boom Mic in a normal situation. But we couldn't really do either of those.

Ann Shin:

We worked with the Zoom recorders. They're quite proliferous now, but they look a bit bigger than a remote control and they have two microphone heads at the top that give you stereo sound. The sound man would, he would just go and stand next to the person who was talking and record what they were saying through his recorder that he kept in his coat pocket. So we didn't have any microphones at all.

Ann Shin:

We did master interviews in the safe houses in the evenings. And at one point I was like... We even had a consideration of whether we wanted to try and green-screen while we were there. And we almost set up a green screen. I had brought a cloth in case we wanted to put some images behind the speakers. But in the end, we nixed it and just thought it's much better and more real to show the safe house we happen to be in at the time of filming.

Ann Shin:

And then with the crew, I went with an all-Asian crew. I had tried to get Chinese-Canadian DPs. My DP, Stephen Chang, I think he was Jamaican-Canadian, but he's Jamaican-Chinese-Canadian. That was awesome to work with him. He didn't understand Mandarin, unfortunately, but that was okay. It worked out fine.

Ann Shin:

And we worked with a Chinese sound man who was really resourceful and took upon great risks because as a Chinese citizen, if he had been caught doing this work, the repercussions for him and his family would have been not great. Luckily, everything went smoothly. We took a lot of caution and we always listened to what Dragon told us to do in terms of like, when was it safe to film and when was it advisable not to?

Gilad Cohen:

I just cannot believe the level of organization, like these dummy drives and making sure you're mailing the right stuff over and having that stuff FedExed back. We can barely get our act together here on this podcast, which is just like, "Let's all jump on a Zoom call." And the level of scrutiny and detail that you have to jump through is wild.

Ann Shin:

I'm sure if you have to do a podcast undercover, you would take the precautions too. And that's the other thing that I learned a lot during this shoot. I was very inspired and in awe of the kinds of risks that these defectors were taking.

Ann Shin:

I just expressed my appreciation to them about them sharing their stories with us, but also my admiration for them. And they were all really humble and modest about it. When I kept saying, "Well, it's amazing. You're so brave." They were saying, "We're not brave, we're just doing what we have to." And I realized that most of us, if we have to do something, we will rise to the challenge, I think.

Gilad Cohen:

You have no choice and you're just witnessing someone going through moments of survival to do whatever they can.

Taylah Harris-Mungo:

But now that you've released *The Last Exiles*, which is your fiction novel that's based on a true story, I believe, and set in North Korea during the final years of Kim Jong-Il's regime. The book follows the complex nature of North Korea's isolating dictatorship as well as a rare glimpse into what life is like for folks who are locked inside.

Taylah Harris-Mungo:

And so, Gilad and I, we mentioned this before the podcast, we both just finished reading, on Gilad's end, and listening, on my end, to the book. I'll just put this year right now, we both were hooked on your novel. But we're really curious, what kind of reception did you receive from this novel?

Ann Shin:

There's been a lot of great conversations that I've had with people who've been really moved by the stories and interested in finding out more about the situation of North Korean defectors today. And also, the quest for freedom that the main characters, Jin and Suja, undertake is, I think, emblematic of any quest for freedom.



Ann Shin:

There are risks that they face, there's a coming to face reality at that point when scales fall from their eyes and they realize the life that they thought that they were leading was all a sham. You see how they make choices at each juncture.

Ann Shin:

Like Suja is brave about renouncing a lot of her comfortable upper middle class lifestyle in Pyongyang because she realizes the truth of what her society is like. And she makes the brave decision to, one, find her true love, find her love, but also to step away from everything.

Ann Shin:

So, a lot of the challenges and decisions that Jin and Suja make are the kinds of things I hope that will inspire readers. Thinking about the choices that we face every day in terms of, are you leading the life you want to lead and how free are we in the society? How critical can we be about the conditions under which we're living in or other people are living in? And what can we do to those changes?

Gilad Cohen:

As I'm listening to you speak about that too, with Suja and Jin, it's also the sacrifices you're willing to make. In their case, it's the people you're forced to have to leave behind in order to live that better life.

Gilad Cohen:

I was reflecting about your book as well, because it's set in the final years of Kim Jong-Il's rule over North Korea. To me, it's mind-boggling to think already that this December will have been 10 years since Kim Jong-Un came into power. And looking at this in two ways, has much changed since Kim Jong-Un has taken over? And if so, how do you see your book being any different? I'm not sure if you've ever been asked this, but how could it have been any different? And the fates of Jin and Suja, would their fates have been any different if the story took place now?

Ann Shin:

The title of the book is called *The Last Exiles*, and it comes near the end of Suja and Jin's journey in the book where they realize Kim Jong-Il has died. And they wonder wistfully whether things might change in their country now that Kim Jong-Il is dead. Could they be the last exiles that have to escape from their country?

Ann Shin:

Sadly, we know that that's not the case. Nothing has changed. In fact, since Kim Jong-Un came into power, even as he was coming into power, he emphasized a crackdown on defectors. He's basically run the country as his father did, which was the defense initiative going, the nuclear program and everything, to have the prison camps in place and to have the rural areas of North Korea suffer.

Ann Shin:

They're still receiving food aid from the UN because they can't feed their own country. That being said, there are things that have developed. So, under Kim Jong-Un, there's been more of this gray market coming back where people have been buying and selling goods on the black market or the gray market.

Ann Shin:

And so, there's this gray market economy that's been doing well in North Korea. In other ways, they have been flourishing. There's been an emphasis on technological educations. There's North Koreans hackers hacking into Bitcoin accounts or trying to do blackmail of different kinds.

Ann Shin:

And then there's also a rise of the middle class. There's actually golf resorts, there's ski resorts and things like that now that Pyongyang residents will go to. But most of the middle class would be like people in Pyongyang or the larger cities. All the people in the rural centers are still living in shanty constructions. Those living conditions have not changed in three or four decades.

Gilad Cohen:

Those hackers that you talk about too, we at JAYU actually ran into them. [inaudible 00:21:58] film back in 2014 was on North Korea. And moments before the film went on, our whole website went down. We had glowing red skulls flashing all across our website.

Gilad Cohen:

And on our Squarespace in the back, Squarespace being the host of our website. We saw that we had, on any given month from 2012 to 2015-ish, two to three visits a month on our website from Pyongyang. They weren't even shy about the fact that they were monitoring everything that we were doing.

Gilad Cohen:

It's interesting because I've never really thought about it from your perspective, which is like, well, I guess it's an opportunity for somebody, someone's doing something. And then of course, the year after that happened, the interview with Sony. They experienced the same thing, the glowing red skulls.

Ann Shin:

Have they been visiting your site since or not as much?

Gilad Cohen:

No. So, we don't focus on North Korea as much as we used to, so they've found something else to be curious about. And thankfully, we're not on that list.

Taylah Harris-Mungo:

And you mentioned Jin and Suja, the two main protagonists in your novel, having the proverbial scales lifted from their eyes, right? What was it like to narrate and to so beautifully illustrate that kind of loss of innocence or loss of ignorance?

Ann Shin:

A lot of people don't understand how people could live in a regime like that and be completely naive or not know what's really going on. But if you think about how North Korea's sealed, like people do have cell phones, but they're on a closed network. And only the middle class have cell phones. The people who are poor don't.

Ann Shin:

And the only news sources are what's sanctioned by the government. They can't go online and find their own little echo chambers to find out different news, whether it's fake or real, they can only find out what the North Korean party is going to let them know.

Ann Shin:

What I really wanted to show with those characters, Suja and Jin was what it's like to grow up in a society like that. Suja's in upper middle class intelligentsia and to her, life is quite good. And her father's the editor at the Rodong Sinmun, which is the Workers' newspaper. It's the national newspaper. And she feels like life is as it's presented to her.

Ann Shin:

But with Jin, he comes from the outside. He's more representative of a lot of people who are migrants or immigrants or refugees. He comes from a poor background and he was trying to escape his past. He goes through some chameleonic changes.

Ann Shin:

And so, by sheer dint of effort, he's smart, but he studies hard and he gets a scholarship into Pyongyang. And that that's where he meets Suja. He knows already that there's two North Koreas within the same country, but he thinks that's okay. That's just the way it is. And he just wants to be in the upper class. He doesn't want to be in the country anymore.

Ann Shin:

But then when he gets pegged wrongfully for a crime, he realizes he has to escape. And then when he goes to China and sees the wealth of that country, that's when really he understands the extent of the lies that his country has been telling him. And that's a moment of realization where...

Ann Shin:

He understood that the regime was corrupt, that they were imprisoning people wrongfully, but he didn't understand that everything they said about the world was completely false. He thought that all countries were like North Korea and that North Korea in essence was better off than most other countries. He thought everyone had starvation as well as suffering.

Ann Shin:

He didn't realize that most people in the rest of the world had cars, or motorcycles, or they had washing machines and they had heat and water. He did not know that that was the norm. Those are some of the things that were really rewarding for me to do as a writer to get so deep into character that I just think about what it's like when I'm on that street in that northern city in China.

Ann Shin:

And I see all these people walking around, I'm like, "Oh my God, why are they all so rich? Why are they all so chubby. It's just seeing through their eyes." And that's something that I hope that readers will enjoy when they read the book.

Taylah Harris-Mungo:

It almost sounds like for Jin and Suja that loss of innocence moment is happening at two different times, but also in two different countries. Suja is very much realizing everything while still in North Korea. And for Jin, it sounds like once he's in China and gets hit in the face with that change, that's when he starts to have that reflection. I definitely have to go back and read your novel again just after having this conversation, just having another perspective.

Ann Shin:

Suja, it's like her position is like a lot of us, where we may be in a situation we're not very comfortable with, but it takes a long time for any of us to make a change. Right? So with her, she realized certain things about her... Like, oh, is her newspaper reporting erroneously about things? Oh, how did her boyfriend Jin become pegged for this crime?

Ann Shin:

And then, "Oh, wait a second. Are there defects escaping to another country? Oh, there's a black market?" She's discovering all these things about her own society, which are telling her that your position in the society, your family's position in the society is propped up because of all these lies.

Ann Shin:

And so, it's a very hard realization to come to terms with and to act morally on. Her journey is coming to reckoning and the courage that a young woman can exhibit. And I have to tell you, I met North Korean women and they're all strong as nails. They're very inspiring, and I just have a lot of respect and pride and admiration for them.

Taylah Harris-Mungo:

We were talking earlier, Gilad and I, and just developing these questions and just looking at the ongoing situation in North Korea, it's like an open secret. Everyone has an idea that there is iron fist brutality happening on the inside, but there's also that cloistered lack of information as well.

Taylah Harris-Mungo:

So, in reading this book, I felt like I was coming into it from a place of knowing, like I'm very much aware of this secret and watching things develop. And I suppose there's also a little bit of confirmation through the story. I know you mentioned some of what you hope readers would take from the story, but when you were writing this out and drawing from the source, were there any other things that you hope that readers would take from it?

Ann Shin:

There's a number of overarching messages that I hope people will take away from it. One is obviously the human rights concern for North Koreans in North Korea. But this is a personal work of fiction that also draws on more universal themes. And one is the price of freedom and the cost of not choosing freedom for yourself or for your family.

Ann Shin:

I hope that people will be inspired by Jin and Suja's journey to understand that the fight for freedom is important to be a part of. Whether you're living in Toronto, or in Vancouver, or on a farm, or in North Korea, it's our responsibility to, one, be vigilant about, are we living free lives? Are those around us, those we know about, are they able to live free lives too? And if not, to support the effort so that they can.

Ann Shin:

Suja and Jin, they both face a bunch of moral dilemmas on their journey. At one point, Jin, he's trying to escape with his buddy, [Hyok 00:29:12] and his other buddy, [Bey 00:29:14]. They're in a dump truck and Bey has been buried underneath some rubble and they have to try and dig him out. But there's a inspection point coming up and Hyok and Jin are exposed on top of the rubble of the truck.

Ann Shin:

So, they know that once they reach the inspection point, they'll be spotted. So, they have to decide, are they going to try and dig Bey out? Which is impossible in the time that they have left and therefore run the risk of being discovered, or do they abandon Bey, and do they jump out of the truck and save their own skins? With the understanding that chances are they wouldn't have gotten Bey out in time.

Speaker 4:

Jin crawled toward Hyok at the back of the truck. His movement causing the debris to shift and tumble, triggering a small rock slide. Hyok waved at him frantically, "Stop moving," he mouthed.

Speaker 4:

Jin laid there terrified, pinned under the weight of the rocks. Where was Bey? "Bey." Jin called out in a loud whisper. Spreading his arms across the mound of scree, he started crawling again. "Bey, are you... Are you here?"

Speaker 4:

He heard of faint cry. "I'm here. I'm under the rocks. I can't move." Jin turned to Hyok and waved him over, "He's here. We've got to dig him out." "We've got you, Bey," said Jin, as he and Hyok started pushing the rocks away.

Speaker 4:

But even as they shoved, the debris started sliding back down. Jin and Hyok kept at it. Their faces getting blackened with grime as the filthy dust rose, filling their nostrils. It was futile. The rocks kept sliding down.

Speaker 4:

Hyok finally stopped, his shoulders slumping in despair. He looked down at the expansive rock and rubble under which Bey was buried and had a sickening realization.

Speaker 4:

"Bey, buddy." His voice was gravelly and hoarse. "We can't dig you out in time. It's better for you to stay here where they can't see you. When the truck dumps its load, you'll be able to jump out. But me and Jin, they're going to see us here. We have to jump out now."

Speaker 4:

"Don't leave me here," Bey implored. "We're trying," Hyok's voice broke with emotion and he spread his arms across the mound as if attempting to hug Bey through the rubble. "I'm so sorry."

Speaker 4:

Hyok had spent the last two years with Bey sleeping next to him in their prison cell. He'd stared into Bey's face so often, he knew the lines of his face better than his own. Leaving him here wasn't just a betrayal, it could be his death sentence.

Speaker 4:

Hyok pressed his face against the mound of gray rubble and spoke into the darkness. "Hang in there," he said, his voice faltering. "We'll meet you on the other side, I promise." This time there was no reply.

Ann Shin:

No one would want to have to make that kind of decision, but that happens often, including like Jin meets a woman who says she'd rather be sold off as a bride. And he's the one who introduced her to the trafficker unwittingly.

Ann Shin:

And then he doesn't know, does he let her go off with the trafficker or does he try to take her back? These are some difficult decisions that he faces. And it's my attempt at trying to show that things are really murky. Things are gray and we have to make some difficult decisions. And hopefully, you can choose in a way that you'll feel happy to be standing by in the end and not regret.

Ann Shin:

For instance, in the end, Suja, even though she comes from such a privileged background, she's the one who sticks to her guns in terms of what's wrong or what's right? I mean, we may be undocumented refugees in China, but we can't give up our morals just for the sake of survival.

Ann Shin:

These characters come alive on the page. It's not something that I'd originally consciously set out to say, like Suja's going to be this morally strong person, but she ended up just stepping up to the plate. For me, it was inspiring just to see her do that.

Ann Shin:

And it's funny to talk about it, but I'm sure you've heard other writers talk about their characters as people that just reveal themselves to them. So, that's been one of the fun things about writing this book.

Gilad Cohen:

For me, as the reader, I'm not the writer. These are people that I do feel closely connected to. As you're describing that moment where Jin and Hyok are deciding what to do with Bey, that was a really tough part for me to read because I could imagine what it may be like for a friend or somebody I know to have to go through that process.

Gilad Cohen:

I was reflecting earlier when you were talking about North Korean refugees leaving, and you mentioned the one example of Jin getting into China and seeing motorcycles and all that. And that's when he started to understand the full effects.

Gilad Cohen:

Our first podcast interview on this show was with Enoch, a North Korean refugee who lives here in Toronto. And he described walking toward the light. He lived on the North Korean border of China and he kept seeing these flickering lights in the distance and they called to him. And that was where he saw freedom.

Gilad Cohen:

And so, Enoch is a North Korean refugee who lives here in Toronto. And there used to be a lot more North Korean refugees here in Toronto. In fact, at one point, and I remember reading the stat, hearing it from Jack Kim our North Korean expert here in Toronto, who also sits on our board, that outside of South Korea, Canada had the largest community of North Korean refugees in the whole world.

Gilad Cohen:

Can you tell us a little more about how that happened? How did Canada become this safe haven for North Korean refugees and where have they all gone? Because that community has gotten a bit smaller since that time.

Ann Shin:

A lot of the North Korean defectors that were arriving into Canada had come via South Korea but were not forthcoming about that. Because if a refugee is accepted by another country, then technically they're no longer a refugee. Many of the North Koreans who were coming to Canada were saying that they came via China directly.

Ann Shin:

That route would be very difficult because they would have to somehow get on a plane in China to get out to Canada. North Korean defectors who were going to South Korea, they were received by South Korea and they were given training and a stipend, but once they were released into the society, they were facing discrimination, it was very hard for them to get work or facing difficulties of different types. Because South Korea had such a generous program of acceptance of North Koreans that other South Koreans were starting to get a little bit disgruntled about it.

Ann Shin:

"Oh, they're getting so much welfare money." They weren't really catching on to the whole work ethic or to working for money, because a lot of the North Koreans, their towns that they're from had no industry because everything was shut down. So, they didn't work.

Ann Shin:

So, to be suddenly thrust into a hyper-capitalist society like South Korea was a culture shock. So, for various reasons, I think, some North Korean defectors who were living in South Korea made it to Canada, hoping to start their lives fresh in Canada.

Ann Shin:

They were here until, I think it was during, was it a Harper government? I'm not sure that [inaudible 00:36:12] process the defectors. And so, they would question them to just try and discover whether they actually came from China or not.

Ann Shin:

And in that time, if they found that a defector had possibly come from South Korea or did come from South Korea, they would send them back to South Korea saying you were already received as a refugee in South Korea.

Ann Shin:

There was a large community of North Korean defectors in Canada, which was wonderful. And they were involved in the churches and they were starting to do work and trying to start up businesses. But a lot of them got sent back to South Korea, which is really unfortunate and it has to do with the International Convention on Refugee Status.

Ann Shin:

And I think that that has been discussed many times that refugees who may be traveling through another country, they should be received by a third or fourth country. That hasn't changed from what I understand. You might be more up-to-date than me on that.

Gilad Cohen:

It was during the Harper regime, because I remember it was Jason Kenney was the Minister of Immigration and he was the one that started really hammering down. And I think they sent all the fingerprints back to South Korea of the North Korean, and it was like a 99% match or something like that. I remember it was a really heartbreaking times.

Taylah Harris-Mungo:

And all of your works; films, books, poetry, it's all rooted in social commentary and social justice. Suja, one of the main characters from your novel, *The Last Exiles*, she's also a photographer. She's also an artist.

Taylah Harris-Mungo:

And so, we're curious to know for you personally, what role does the arts play in bringing the world's attention to inequity and injustice, and why do you use the arts to talk about human rights?

Ann Shin:



When a person relates to another person, they're more likely to be able to change their way of thinking about them and actually do something. So, this word has been used a lot, the word empathy and empathizing.

Ann Shin:

But I think that that really is the thing that increases the love that we'll have for one another or for people that we might not know well and might not consider that we might want to care or love them.

Ann Shin:

But I think that stories and works of art help us get there. So podcasts like The Hum podcast and others, as well as films, and books, like storytelling, I find, that's the medium that really helps me understand another person and empathize with them and then really feel a deep respect and a call to action to help ensure that they are able to live free lives like myself.

Ann Shin:

Activism definitely works in terms of mobilizing people and having a clear call to action, and art helps people feel it in their hearts in a real, honest way so that they're able to relate with them in many ways and recognize the humanity. And as a storyteller, stories are the thing that I think really speaks to me most. And that's what I love to do. I love to share stories.

Gilad Cohen:

And you're so brilliant at it. And there's so many ways that people can engage with your artworks. We haven't even talked about the fact that you had a brand new film, *Artificial Immortality*, that opened up at Hot Docs this year. You have a new book that was released this year. You just recently put out a book of poetry. We also talked about *The Defector*.

Gilad Cohen:

How can folks engage with your art, your books, your films? How can more people learn about the work that you're doing and get behind it?

Ann Shin:

So, *The Last Exiles* is available at all local books sellers, on Amazon. It's a HarperCollins book. I really enjoy talking with people and I've done a lot of author visits, virtual author visits, with book clubs and readers. So, if you'd like to, just feel free to reach out. There is on my website [annshin.com](http://annshin.com) where you can contact me through that website.

Ann Shin:

The film, *Artificial Immortality* takes a look at facing mortality, and features my father and some of my family, as well as the latest thinkers in artificial intelligence and biotech, just to see where we're headed in terms of cloning humanity. It's a very different subject.

Ann Shin:

But that's going to be playing at the [inaudible 00:40:11] Fox in the fall and it will also be on Crave. So, you guys can watch it in the theaters or streaming on Crave.

Gilad Cohen:

Great. Thank you so much. And congrats again, Ann, on all your success. Thank you for everything you're doing.

Ann Shin:

Oh, thanks. I really enjoyed talking with you both. Thanks for having me on.

Gilad Cohen:

Thank you, everyone, for tuning in. My name is Gilad Cohen and I'm one of your co-hosts here on The Hump.

Taylah Harris-Mungo:

And I'm Taylah Harris-Mungo, your other co-host.

Gilad Cohen:

Our producers are Alex Castellani and Rachel Lewis.

Taylah Harris-Mungo:

The Hum is an initiative of JAYU, a charity committed to sharing human rights stories through the arts.

Gilad Cohen:

Help support JAYU and our year-round initiatives like this podcast, our annual human rights film festival, our monthly events and our iAM Program, an initiative that provides free arts and social justice mentorship to hundreds of equity-seeking youth each year. You can make a tax-receiptable donation at [jayu.ca/donate](http://jayu.ca/donate).