

Soyeon Jang: When I saw the land and then saw it, even the color, exactly same like North Korea. So I feel, this is my homeland, and I really thank God. Yeah, of course, this is my country.

Speaker 2: You're listening to The Hum.

Gilad Cohen: Welcome everyone to a very special episode of The Hum Podcast. Not only is this our 50th episode, a bit of a milestone for sure, but this episode was also recorded for the first time in front of a live audience at our JAYU Studio as part of our 10th Annual Human Rights Film Festival. Now this episode in many ways is also poetic. For those of you who don't know, The Hum Podcast is an initiative of JAYU, a Toronto-based charity that is committed to sharing human rights stories through the arts. We started off back in 2012 as a North Korean human rights advocacy group and we understood then, just like we understand now, that there is no better way of sharing human rights stories than through the arts. Although we don't focus at JAYU exclusively on North Korean human rights issues anymore, the word jayu means freedom in the Korean language. We kept the name as a way of paying respects to the origins of our organization.

Our first ever episode on the show, 49 episodes ago, if you can believe it, was with Enoch, a North Korean refugee living in Toronto. And so it's fitting that as we celebrate our milestone here with our 50th episode, that we go back to another unimaginable and inspiring story from a North Korean refugee living in Toronto, this time with Soyeon Jang. Please enjoy the episode. And just a note that just like all of our other episodes, we have a free transcript on our website at [thehumpodcast.com](http://thehumpodcast.com) in case you need it to follow along. Enjoy. Welcome everyone officially to day four of our 10th Annual Human Rights Film Festival and for this intimate, live podcast recording with Soyeon Jang. My name is Gilad Cohen, Founder and Executive Director here at JAYU. I use he/him pronouns, and I'm also one half of the co-hosts for The Hum Podcast. I'm joined here today by the lovely Taylah. Taylah, how are you?

Taylah Harris-M...: I'm good. How are you?

Gilad Cohen: I'm doing well.

Taylah Harris-M...: Yeah. Hi, everybody. We're happy that you can join us for this special live recording. Like Gilad mentioned, my name is Taylah. My name is Taylah Harris-Mungo, first and last. I use they/them pronouns. And before we kick things off and get this interview going, we'd like to give you a brief overview of what you can expect today. So in just a few short minutes, we'll be sitting down at the table with Soyeon Jang.

Gilad Cohen: Here at JAYU, we take sharing human rights stories through the arts very seriously. So I'm going to kick us off with a very quick story. About 35 years ago, 37 years ago now, actually, I was born in Israel and my family actually decided to leave Israel because it was super unsafe to live there. And so my mom didn't

want her only son one day having to grow up to serve in the military. And when I was just a year and a half old, my family decided to immigrate here to Canada, so I and my sister could also feel safer.

And so this place where I do feel safer, this place that I do call home, Toronto or Tkaronto, that sense of safety that I do have, I understand comes at the expense of years and years and years of terrible colonization and injustice to indigenous peoples. When I think of about that injustice, I think about residential schools, I think about the Sixties Scoop and also think about foster care. So wherever we are today, I encourage all of us, especially settlers here to reflect on this piece of land that we do call home, to give thanks for the safety that we do have, and to also give thanks to the traditional caretakers of this land and the folks that were here before us.

Taylah Harris-M...: This place that we call home, Toronto or Tkaronto is the traditional territory of many nations, including the Mississaugas of the Credit, the Anishnabeg, the Chippewa, the Haudenosaunee and the Wendat people, and is now home to many diverse First Nations, Inuit, and Métis people. We also want to acknowledge that Toronto is covered by Treaty 13 with the Mississaugas of the Credit.

Gilad Cohen: Thank you. And I'd like to quickly shout out our festival sponsors, the Province of Ontario and the Ontario Arts Council. We are also thrilled to have HanVoice as our co-presenter for this event. HanVoice, for those who don't know, is Canada's largest North Korean human rights advocacy group and we are honored to be joined here this evening by Sean Chung, the Executive Director of HanVoice, who I will welcome up to say a few quick things.

Taylah Harris-M...: Come join us.

Sean Chung: So my name is Sean. I'm the Executive Director of HanVoice. We're a Canadian organization. We have 15 chapters now across Canada, from Vancouver to Halifax, with over 300 members. We are very excited to be co-presenting this event because we just reached an agreement with the Canadian government to now open Canada as a pathway for North Korean refugees which means that ordinary Canadians can now privately sponsor North Korean refugees. It's a pilot program that's going to take place in the next two years, but if you want to donate to support our efforts, then please go to [hanvoice.ca](http://hanvoice.ca). Thanks.

Taylah Harris-M...: We understand that we're talking about some pretty deep stuff today. Life in North Korea is not easy and the journey of being a refugee, especially as a woman, is not easy. We understand that these conversations may bring on various levels of discomfort or triggering feelings for folks. So if anybody needs any additional support, we have an active listener, Amanda, who's available to provide additional support in case anyone needs to feel grounded. Our audience can text 647-696-0893 or email [amanda.virtualdesk@gmail.com](mailto:amanda.virtualdesk@gmail.com). A special thank

you to our interpreters for this event, Francine Gillis and Timothy Keslick for the amazing interpretation that they're doing today.

Gilad Cohen: Thank you so much. Thanks, Taylah. And with that, I'd like to introduce you to our guest for this evening. Soyeon Jang was born in Hamhung City, North Korea. In 1999, she fled to China to escape from the famine known as the Arduous March which killed countless North Koreans from 1994 to 2000. In China, she met South Korean missionaries and Choong Hyun Mission Church members from US and Beijing and started to learn about Jesus. She became Christian. After surviving in China for seven years studying Mandarin, she braved deportation and brazenly walked into the US embassy past Chinese guards to seek asylum in the United States.

She settled in South Korea. She studied IT programming at Yanbian University of Science and Technology in China and business management at Hankuk University of Foreign Studies in South Korea. She worked as a web developer in China and South Korea. She also worked at the Korean branch of the US-based anti-North Korean broadcaster Radio Free Asia in South Korea. In 2011, she visited Canada as a member of a Christian NGO group which helped North Koreans and worked as a correspondent for Radio Free Asia in Canada. During this time she established CrossingNK, based in Toronto, Canada, working to help establish basic human rights for North Koreans. Please help me in welcoming to the stage, Soyeon Jang. Soyeon, how are you today?

Soyeon Jang: I'm pretty good.

Gilad Cohen: I'm so glad you could join us.

Soyeon Jang: Yes.

Gilad Cohen: So we're so excited to talk a little bit more about your life and your journey away from North Korea and here to Toronto. So we're going to start at the very beginning. Can you tell us a little bit more about what life was like for you in North Korea as a child? What are some of your earliest memories growing up in North Korea?

Soyeon Jang: My early life in North Korea, I think it's not that bad because I grew up in military camp. So my father was soldier. Because I'm not [foreign language 00:07:38] generation, I was born in 1975. And it's quiet when I was in middle school, in elementary school and even high school, it's not that bad. Before 1990s, everything provide government. I have two sister, really well and my family, my father, and I have actually good memory in my childhood. And I still remember Kim Il-sung birthday, I have the small gift like a city and really grateful and then bow the portrait, I really appreciate that one. It's exciting good memory.

Taylah Harris-M...: Yeah. It's a really good place to start because I think when people are thinking about North Korea, they don't think about these positive, good memories that folks can have.

Soyeon Jang: Yeah.

Taylah Harris-M...: Even folks who have defected and left. But between 1994 and 2000, North Koreans lived through one of the worst famines known as the Arduous March and it was estimated that over one million North Koreans passed away.

Soyeon Jang: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Taylah Harris-M...: Can you share a little bit more about what that was like during that time? And why was it called ... I know we spoke about this in the back, but why was it called the Arduous March?

Soyeon Jang: Since later 1990, it start I remember exactly 1995. And I remember on the street because my life is military life, and the normal civilian life, different North Korea. Because military is military priority policy, right? Everything provide government. So we really didn't know about outsider people's life, but then since 1995, when I go to the city and found some street beggar on the street, a little bit surprise, a little bit shock. And next year, there were kind of street child is more increase. Later, my father discharged military service and we just come out in the normal life in society. In 1997, it's a whole street, there's so many people on the street like dying flies.

All city, I remember full of smell like body. And I think not only people because of hunger, also because of disease. There's so many diseases like cholera, paratyphoid, so before even, we never hear about the disease. So I also got the disease cholera and first, my sister got sick. I saw my sister within one day like all skin just remain bone and they took my sister in the hospital, nearby the hospital. And another day, I was also sick same, got the cholera and I not that serious sick, but I also in the hospital. And then later and every day, so many the left door, people just dying and the body is not took away, just put at another door. And then, because so many people die, there no people to took away the body.

So they have to waiting, have to wait until body is one truck and then once a week, they took away. And then nearby, just not far away, nearby here, the city and then they just dig a little bit hole and then dump them. Cover by soil, that's it. And later, I a little bit well and then come out, the nearby hill, all cover is graves. And then when the rain coming, the birds come, took the body something. So I remember, I really vividly remember it's 1997-1999. It is called Arduous March, right? Full of the body smell and seems like the world is collapse, that I felt at the time. And later, we called in North Korea, it's called Arduous March. Actually have to say great famine. I know how many people die, but at my city, actually die so many people. I vividly watch that. But later when I

go out to in the South Korea and then they say three million people die. I think that was make sense, I can say.

Gilad Cohen: Why did they call it the Arduous March like instead of calling it the great famine? What was the reason for calling it the Arduous March? Where did that come from?

Soyeon Jang: Okay. So that was Arduous March actually come from Kim Il-sung history. There is a really big event in Kim Il-sung. In Manchuria, he fighting with the Japanese Imperialism, right? And it's a short, I think 50 days, he had to really hardest march, have to because escape from the attack from Japanese army, right, so really hard. But eventually he overcome that march and then escaped to Soviet Povarov [Schkola 00:13:28] the area and then survive. So in that one is really kind of a big event in North Korea. You know what, actually have to great famine. It is great famine, it is not Arduous March, it's not march on the street, march like this, but North Korean government want to hide the fact the hunger, suffering, famine. Not use the famine, just says Arduous March. It's kind of propaganda term.

Gilad Cohen: Yeah. Just as a way to motivate people like the leader had to go through an Arduous March and now we also have to as well.

Soyeon Jang: Because is Arduous March, it's great famine because not our fail is socialism, the system, because of United States want to destroy our system, our society. That government say like this.

Gilad Cohen: I'm curious, you were talking about that time with Kim Il-sung being in power. He passed away. Around that time, Kim Jong-il came into power. I'm curious what was your relationship like you personally with the leadership? Like how did you look at the leaders at that time? And did it change at all later in your life as you were considering leaving North Korea?

Soyeon Jang: I told you before when I in the school, it's not that bad. I always thinking, it great leader, it's always great in the world. It's not only in North Korea. And then all of the people, all of the world people adore them, have to listen, they have to learn our society. So that kind of proud of that, proud of that and the Kim Il-sung really working hard for us, and that's why we have to always listen them, follow their policy. There is actually no doubt, no doubt. And after great famine, I think people, not most of them, still most of them have to obey what they say. Kinds of question, what the situation? I can't explain what is that because we have to achieve something, you know ideal society, but we just not overcome this famine, right. But they didn't even mean exactly what going to happen. I can't explain that because we never learn about that. There is no compare something other else, right? Some question, but we didn't know that.

Taylah Harris-M...: That's an interesting thing to have to go from just having that obedience and that level of being sure about it to going to having doubts and questions that you have no place for ...

Soyeon Jang: Most the people escape, it's not escape. Just looking for food, not escape the society I think.

Taylah Harris-M...: So I'm wondering if you could walk us through the decision to leave North Korea. What was that like for you and what prompted that?

Soyeon Jang: I remember it was my father's birthday have to leave because we tried to do everything, sell everything just get only food. I realized we only have 10 days food to eat. That means because we tried to anything, several years, right, that means that after 10 days, there is no food. I have to find a way. And one of them in my neighborhood ask us, why don't you go to China? We have relatives in China because my mom lives in China. It's kind of they have a conflict, but we disconnected maybe 20 years. But in this time, we really need seek to help. Okay, then we can go to seek my relatives. So my mom and me decided to go. My father was sick, the home, can't move. There is decided to leave. I think it's not that means escape.

Gilad Cohen: You thought it was just temporary.

Taylah Harris-M...: Yeah.

Soyeon Jang: Yes, temporary, just visit the China and get some help and come back. That is our original plan.

Gilad Cohen: Can you tell me a little bit more about the journey? Like of leaving, tell me about the day that you were leaving and how did you get in ... You crossed into China I'm assuming, so can you tell me a little bit more about that journey?

Soyeon Jang: Okay. We are leaving. We had to prepare some one, the food, had to prepare food. On the train, there is no food for provide that can buy, right. Have to make some food and we also ... Anyways, so long story, but just simply, have to bribe. On the train, always have police, right, and then bribe and they give us, make space. Even this train full of the people. There are no space, even washroom. Full people. They have to go to the exchange, business, so many. They have to looking for food most of them. So we get the train and train often to stop like the distance from Toronto to Ottawa, I guess ...

Taylah Harris-M...: Wow.

Soyeon Jang: ... it took three days.

Gilad Cohen: Three days?

Soyeon Jang: Yes, three days by train. Eventually get there because the friend who with us, he already know, have experience to how to get cross the border. And we get there, we bribe another the border guard and can be just watching us and to say to cross border, the river and we just cross there the ...

Gilad Cohen: Is that the most common way to leave North Korea? How can people get out of North Korea?

Soyeon Jang: We don't have passport. Because you know ordinary people never had passport. Only specific people is allowed by government have. I never heard that you have, can allow the passport. This is only way to illegal cross the border. That's it.

Gilad Cohen: It's the only way to legally leave.

Soyeon Jang: Yes.

Gilad Cohen: It's actually illegal to leave the country under any circumstance.

Soyeon Jang: Of course, illegal. We know that if the government know we illegally cross border, punish, we have to go jail, but looking for food is more important.

Gilad Cohen: Yeah. It's survival. So you were talking about your dad was sick that day. He wasn't feeling well and so your mom crossed. You think it's temporary. So what ended up happening with your father? Did you leave him in North Korea? Did you leave any other family behind? What was that ...

Soyeon Jang: No, he left alone and we must come back to care of him.

Gilad Cohen: Yeah. And did you go back?

Soyeon Jang: Me? No. Something happened later. Something happened later.

Gilad Cohen: So was that the last time you saw your father then?

Soyeon Jang: Yes, it is last time I saw my father. I never get back.

Taylah Harris-M...: You ended up in China and China has an interesting relationship with North Korea. Actually, their relationship goes against International Refugee Law and so if they catch a North Korean defector in China, they send them back. So how did you survive in China, not knowing ... You said that you had the intention to go and get help from your family, but you're in a new country, don't know the language, the customs, the way of life and you didn't go back to North Korea. How did you survive in China for the time that you were there?

Soyeon Jang: After cross border, because I have to say this one and can answer the question.

Gilad Cohen: [crosstalk 00:21:17]

Soyeon Jang: Cross border and our plan to just temporary and get back and we eventually met our relatives. They are so kind and really sympathetic our situation and then give some help and then go back to North Korea. And the next day, my mom and me in the street, so final like we can take pictures, something like that and just temporary separate with my mom. I just like abducted by gangster in China on the street daytime and they put me in the car. I remember three people, three man, the Chinese man and they took me. In the beginning, in the first time I thinking, I thought they are Chinese police because I illegally crossed the border. They recognize me as North Korean so I didn't can't say anything.

But later realize, they're gangster, gang group and they kidnap woman professionally like only North Korean lady. Later, I noticed. In the beginning, I didn't know anything. And they took me at a small another car, two hours, and then they had another group and they took me to another place and there is another North Korean lady, younger than me and the lady already know everything. It is a really common thing happened several years in the between the area. Both the area in China, so many North Korean lady, woman solded. They just kept them and they sold another area, farmer and Chinese farmer. And the young lady told me because she already sold by the farmer and the gangster get them again, took her again, sold another farmer. Just like this.

Gilad Cohen: And that's very common for North Korean women to get human trafficked?

Soyeon Jang: Yes.

Gilad Cohen: Why is that?

Soyeon Jang: In China, in most remote area in country area, they need wife. They lack of lady. North Korean lady is once cross the border, most are recognized by ethnic Korean, Chinese, Korean Chinese and they noticed. North Korean lady, no place to go even, right. They have to even working illegally, can not work in China. So only way to go to sold. Some lady want [inaudible 00:24:08] sold because they don't want to go back to North Korea died hunger, right. Hungry. But some lady didn't know what happened like me, just sold.

Gilad Cohen: So what happened to you? You're in the process of getting human trafficked, how did you escape that entire situation?

Soyeon Jang: It took several years. The first time I just sold the really remote, I never know about the area and later after two years, I eventually can escape the village. But during, when I living there even that small village, more than a hundred the North Korean lady there. Every village is North Korean lady.

Taylah Harris-M...: In the village that you were in, there were over a hundred North Korean women.



Soyeon Jang: Yeah. And somebody wanted to just, there is no way to escape destiny and somebody wanted to try escape, but really hard because really the remote village, every, even the police in the communities, they're all relatives, they're watching each other. It's not escape, cannot escape. But I'm lucky, eventually can escape. And later, I get back to in that area nearby border because the village really find almost nearby Beijing. But you know, the border area really far right, but eventually I can escape. I get back to the border area in North Korea because I have to contact my mom. Because when they kidnapped me, I lost contact my mom, so lose contact. So I have to tell my mom, I alive. I alive, I'm still alive. That's why I escaped to get back to the area and then wrote them to North Korea, to my mom. Because at the time, my mom go back because have to care of my father, right. So my mom get back to North Korea and then I wrote the letter, I'm alive. So later, my mom replied so happy, you're alive.

Gilad Cohen: How did you keep in touch with your mother in North Korea? Because from what I understand, you can't make phone calls, right, or it's not like you can send a letter or a message. [crosstalk 00:26:37] So how are you able to contact your family in North Korea?

Soyeon Jang: Because my relatives, they have contact each other before, right, so I ask my relatives. Because I can't writing in the letter, I'm your daughter, I'm alive, I can't. So my relatives like secretly say, cannot say your daughter, your something cousin daughter alive, like that. Like the secret code and then let my mom know. It's like this.

Taylah Harris-M...: Wow, I feel like I need an active listener. I'm really, just as an aside, just really glad that you were able to get in contact with your mom and that she was able to get back in contact with you.

Soyeon Jang: [crosstalk 00:27:21] Yeah, I so glad also. Because there are all purpose to I have to live. Because when I got sold, it's means life is for me is meaningless. I really want to give up my life because I never thinking I also became sold woman. Because you know what, even I didn't go to university, North Korea, really proud of my education, and our socialism great. We have to became a great country and I was member there. Kind proud of that and then later suddenly became solded woman, what that mean? I really confused about that. Make me so shame. Just it's long time to figure out what country that the North Korea that I was born. What the country, what the hell? What going to happen there? Really kind of long time. Later, eventually something, something wrong realize the leader, Kim Jong-il, like Kim family ...

Gilad Cohen: I want to learn more about how that started to happen with you. But I also want to understand, like how did you get out of China? How did you escape out of China? How did you find freedom?

Soyeon Jang: I was lucky. Later, I eventually contact my mom. I got achieve the purpose, the reason I have for life, right? And later I just what is next, I thinking about what is

next? What is my next purpose? And thinking about I have to survive here and then have to make money to send my mom is next my purpose and find something work in China. Later, I met the South Korean Christian missionary and then they introduced me, the Yanbian Science Technology University is small program, a six-months program IT training, they introduced me there.

So I go there and studying and I can start, I can work. I could in South Korean IT company in Shanghai City. It's big city in China. So during that, it's take a couple of years. Eventually, I little bit know about the China and my situation, a little bit financially stable. Because I have to hide my identity and all my friend is around me, nobody know I am from North Korea, but I have to find because I'm still illegally stay in China so I have to find a way to how can I get the stable status. So I'm seeking the way.

Taylah Harris-M...: So you learned Chinese, you were able to hide as a native Chinese speaker in China.

Soyeon Jang: Yes.

Taylah Harris-M...: And then you eventually ended up in South Korea. What was the difference like living in South Korea versus when you were living in China?

Soyeon Jang: I eventually get the my real identity in South Korea. When I just get the South Korea in the airport in, I was in South Korea, national security, they just come through and I saw the land in South Korea land, I almost could cry because the land exactly same land in North Korea. Because I was seven years in China, I never thinking about this before because of so obsessed to have to work and survive. And then I was just arrive South Korea, when I saw the land and then saw it even the color, exactly same like North Korea. So I feel this is my homeland and I really thank God. Thank, God save half my country. Yeah, of course, this is my country. This time, it's now my country, right. It's a bit different, and of course, I get the ID. I became citizenship in South Korea and I got the passport and can travel anywhere, right. It's countries, you know the differences.

Gilad Cohen: Yeah. It must be such a huge sense of relief. I'm curious, not just for you, but for other North Korean people who are living in South Korea. Because I understand there's tens of thousands of North Koreans living in South Korea. What is life like for many North Koreans who are in South Korea? Is life easy for them? Is it easy for them to integrate into society? Are they happy there?

Soyeon Jang: Yeah. In the beginning, most of us so excited, so brilliant you know building but in the reality, it's really different. Really it's not easy to integrate. For me also, in the beginning really good but when I really start working with them, I found out really different like oil and water not mixed together. When I was working in South Korean company and my boss is just exactly directly say what kind of the benefit you can get from government. I said they something provide something,

you know, the deposit the rent. Just in the beginning, they provide something. They so angry. They not care about our citizenship, why they care of outside and took care of like you. In before me, I'm making so humiliated and the next, I can't continue to work at the company. So I feel like they ... It's more than 10 years ago, I realize reality. Comes South Korean, North Korean, huge, huge difference like this.

Gilad Cohen: Is that common for other North Koreans who are living there?

Soyeon Jang: I think so it's more difficult because I can work because I used working in the [inaudible 00:33:24] right, there. But later, like in South Korea, it's a dirty job like ... Anyways, really difficult, hard in construction and who is work in restaurant. They more and more discrimination get.

Gilad Cohen: Did that play a role in you deciding to leave? Because now you're living in Canada. Can you ...

Soyeon Jang: I can't say that is main reason because I was really sick after when I arrive South Korea ... Another thing, I have to bring my family, my mom and father, right? That is why I have to get ... So I send broker and I looking for my mom, my father and eventually, I heard my father just pass away six months ago and only my mom came back to South Korea eventually. Yeah, something, but eventually successfully my mom arrive South Korea. But why something, I lose ... meaningless to live, I don't know why. Because I achieve everything like because I really want to study university in South Korea. I can study eventually, I can work where I want, but I don't know, it's lose interest. I think I didn't realize that time kinds of depression something, so lose. What is the reason to live? So I'm really sick because seven years in China really hard. I didn't realize I was sick, but once I arrive South Korea and everything is fine, I got sick really serious and then I in hospital and something like this.

I just temporary stop my studying. And that time, I attend the Christian missionary who is sending freedom news to North Korea. You know the [ballroom 00:35:30] mission. Ballroom, the [inaudible 00:35:33], that is big issue in South Korea right now, and I used to attend the campaign. Whenever I attended the campaign, it became make me alive. So I realized something, that one is make me meaning, give some meaning, right? So I started to attend the campaign missionary. And later, they have contact with in here also in Korean community in Toronto, they also supporting North Korean human rights organization, so they have contact each other. And that time, I just planned to visit here in Toronto, 2011. And later, I also used to work in [inaudible 00:36:23] in South Korea branch, used as working as a reporter. And when I arrived there, they ask me to work in here in correspondent so I accept the job. That was beginning start to stay in Toronto.

Taylah Harris-M...: Two separate journeys from two separate countries that were supposed to be a short visit ended up being a turning point in your life.

Soyeon Jang: Right.

Taylah Harris-M...: How has life in Canada been for you? Is there a large North Korean community here?

Soyeon Jang: It is some issue, immigrant issue in North Korea. So I had to take the case by case. Somebody can accept, somebody's not. So now it's only I think 50 family is living here right now.

Taylah Harris-M...: [crosstalk 00:37:15] Only 50?

Gilad Cohen: Just 50 families?

Soyeon Jang: Yeah, around, yeah. [crosstalk 00:37:19]

Gilad Cohen: At one point, there were more North Koreans here, is that true?

Soyeon Jang: Yeah, before more. They visit here so many North Korean. Yes, but somebody come, go back and somebody living here.

Gilad Cohen: Yeah. So the population has gone down here?

Soyeon Jang: Yeah.

Gilad Cohen: Do you know why there's less North Koreans here than there were? Because at one point, there were estimated maybe over a 1,000?

Soyeon Jang: 700 is maximum.

Taylah Harris-M...: 700 individuals, 700 people, or 700 families?

Soyeon Jang: 700 people, yeah.

Taylah Harris-M...: Okay.

Gilad Cohen: And now the number's lower? [crosstalk 00:37:50] Significantly lower.

Soyeon Jang: Now, it's lower.

Taylah Harris-M...: 50 families total.

Soyeon Jang: Because it's become complicated issue because somebody want to, in North Korea, if North Korean wanted to apply refugee and somebody, it's all different case. But normally is Canadian government not accept their refugee status because they see North Korean have option to go to South Korea. That's why it's not they ...

Gilad Cohen: [crosstalk 00:38:19] They have the option to go South Korea.

Soyeon Jang: Safe country is safe country, so this is not easy to immigrate here.

Gilad Cohen: I understand. Okay. So it's been now over 20 years since you left North Korea. Looking there now, a lot has changed. Kim Jong-un is now in power. It seems like their nuclear program has gotten stronger and stronger and stronger. But I'm curious, for people in North Korea has much changed over the last 20 years? Is life any different there from what you know?

Soyeon Jang: Yeah. It changed a lot, but life is not better. It's more worse actually. For 20 years ago, life is more worse, strict. And even across the border, almost impossible right now. Kim Jong-un is more strict about the defectors.

Taylah Harris-M...: More strict.

Gilad Cohen: How so? So like what happens to a defector? Like if someone in North Korea wants to escape, what happens?

Soyeon Jang: Because they also from in the border area, Kim Jong-un order, if somebody escape, you must shooting them.

Taylah Harris-M...: Wow.

Soyeon Jang: It is the order. They have building the wall between the border area and it is more strict and the people not can escape. And the broker, the cost is more increased. I think 10 times more than before 10 years ago.

Taylah Harris-M...: To hire are a broker to cross?

Soyeon Jang: Yes.

Taylah Harris-M...: Wow.

Gilad Cohen: So it's become harder to leave. You started an organization here in Toronto called CrossingNK. Can you tell us a little bit more about your organization?

Soyeon Jang: Yeah. Because I later working here and then I can writing about the freedom news, even the Canadian society and then in North Korea, actually the article to send the North Korea and can opportunity interview lot of ... Because even I North Korean, I can't know whole individual situation, right. But I'm lucky to can tell their story and later found something. Because I really later I more about know in Canada. Canada will be good country for, other land for North Korean defector because South Korean is still have like, I told before, discrimination, something, and more issues about political issue.

Something happened in North Korea and they extremely divided the pro and the anti-North Korean group in South Korea. Whenever something happen and North Korean group want to how can manipulated the defectors, right. And the pro North Korean, they really hate something in North Korean defectors, something because they interrupt to between North Korean government and South Korean government so are still they not stable. So I think in Canada, a really good option to put them still as much as Korean [inaudible 00:41:48] divide. That's why first [inaudible 00:41:50] we have to make some the activity in Canada.

Taylah Harris-M...: Right. And so how can folks here support North Koreans who have escaped or North Koreans who are still living in North Korea?

Soyeon Jang: Yeah, good question. Number one, I think save one life, it can save most of them, I can say. So like the HanVoice recently released a program, they're really good. And then Canadian government eventually maybe they accept, they set up the police to accept the woman and children in Canada. Really good. So at the number one action, you have save life as much as you can. Even the increased 10,000 the cost, broker cost, that is really important. So sometimes one person can change the whole world. So I think strongly agree even though there is so many option, you have to save one life. That is most important.

And the other one have to maybe have to support who already defected country like who is living in 50 family who already settle down here. And even South Korea, so many, 13,000 people living there. Have to support them because not only the financially, most of them have trauma. Trauma, they have so have to care about them. If one successful for the country, they will help their own family in North Korea, right? There is big power about that. I think they were really priority and they support ... I also, the audience want to support JAYU and you know, HanVoice, that great to see, yeah.

Gilad Cohen: Thank you so much, Soyeon.

Taylah Harris-M...: Thank you so much.

Gilad Cohen: I'm just so inspired listening to you prevail. You've had so many obstacles you've had to overcome just to be with us here so thank you for your strength and for your courage.

Soyeon Jang: I'm really appreciate you listening my story.

Gilad Cohen: Thank you, Soyeon.

Taylah Harris-M...: [crosstalk 00:44:02] Thank you so much.

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

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

Gilad Cohen: Our producers are Alex Castellani and Rachael Lewis.

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

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