



The Aquariums of Pyongyang: Ten Years in the North Korean Gulag

By Chol-hwan Kang, Pierre Rigoulot

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North Korea is today one of the last bastions of hard-line Communism. Its leaders have kept a tight grasp on their one-party regime, quashing any nascent opposition movements and sending all suspected dissidents to its brutal concentration camps for "re-education." Kang Chol-hwan is the first survivor of one of these camps to escape and tell his story to the world, documenting the extreme conditions in these gulags and providing a personal insight into life in North Korea. Part horror story, part historical document, part memoir, part political tract, this record of one man's suffering gives eyewitness proof to an ongoing sorrowful chapter of modern history. **New edition with a new preface by the author.**

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

North Korea is among the most opaque nations on earth, its regime noted for repression and for the personality cult of its father and son leaders, the late Kim Il Sung and his successor, Kim Jong Il. Kang Chol-hwan draws from firsthand experience in explaining the repression. After the division of North and South Korea, Kang's family returned to North Korea from Japan, where his grandparents had emigrated in the 1930s and where his grandfather had amassed a fortune and his grandmother became a committed Communist. They were fired with idealism and committed to building an Edenic nation. Instead, the family was removed without trial to a remote concentration camp, apparently because the grandfather was suspected of counter-revolutionary tendencies. Kang Chol-hwan was nine years old when imprisoned at the Yodok camp in 1977. Over the next ten years, he endured inhumane conditions and deprivations, including an inadequate diet (supplemented by frogs and rats), regular beatings, humiliations and hard labor. Inexplicably released in 1987, the author states that the only lesson his imprisonment had "pounded into me was about man's limitless capacity to be vicious." Kang's memoir is notable not for its literary qualities, but for the immediacy and drama of the personal testimony. The writing, as translated by Reiner, is unadorned but serviceable, a style suited to presenting one man's account of a brutalized childhood. Kang now lives in South Korea, where he is a journalist; his co-author Rigoulot was a contributor to *The Black Book of Communism*. Together, they have added a chapter to the tales of horror that have come out of Asia in recent years.

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From Library Journal

Most readers know of the politically bleak and economically disastrous history of North Korea. This affecting and directly written memoir will help make that history personal and specific. Kang, who escaped from North Korea in 1992 and now lives in Seoul, writes with the help of Rigoulot, editor of *The Black Book of Communism* (LJ 11/1/99). They tell the story of the Kang family, who became prosperous members of the Korean community in Japan in the 1930s but returned to North Korea out of sympathy in the 1960s. At first they lived comparatively well, but soon they ran afoul of paranoid political repression and became one of the many victims of the Korean prison work camps. The details of the gulag are depressingly familiar from memoirs of other Stalinist regimes, but this work is nonetheless important to record and witness. Charles W. Hayford, Northwestern Univ., Evanston, IL
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Review

"...freezes the heart and seizes the soul." -- *Kirkus Reviews* [7/1/01]

Users Review

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