FOREWORD TO THE WORLD BOOK NIGHT EDITION

Seoul, South Korea

Early in 2015, Shin Dong-hyuk changed his story. He told me by telephone that his life in the North Korean gulag differed from what he had been telling government leaders, human rights activists, and journalists like me. As his biographer, it was a stomach-wrenching revelation.

It was also news. In the nearly three years since *Escape from Camp 14* was published, Shin had become the singlemost famous witness to North Korea's cruelty to its own people. He posed for photographs with the American secretary of state, received human rights awards, and travelled the world to appear on television news programmes like '60 Minutes'. His story helped launch an unprecedented United Nations inquiry that accused North Korea's leaders of crimes against humanity.

When I got off the phone with Shin, I contacted the *Washington Post* (for which I had first written about him) and released all I then knew about his revised story. Then I flew to Seoul, where Shin lives, to find out more. This foreword explains what I learned.

In two weeks of conversations, Shin was less secretive and more talkative than he had ever been during long rounds of interviews with me dating back to 2008. He seemed relieved to be correcting a story he felt had become a kind of prison.

Shin told me that when he defected to South Korea in 2006, he made a panicky, shame-driven decision to conceal and reorder pivotal episodes of his life in the gulag. He hid his role in the execution of his mother and brother. He omitted a singularly painful session of torture that shattered his faith in himself. He did not mention that he lived most of his youth in a political prison that was not Camp 14. He told this version of his life to interrogators from South Korean intelligence and the US Army. He then repeated the narrative for nearly nine years, rarely changing a single detail.

Shin told me he is now determined to tell the truth. Regrettably, he has told me this before. It seems prudent to expect more revisions. Other survivors of the camps are angry at Shin, accusing him of undermining their truthfulness and weakening the international campaign to pressure North Korea to shut down the gulag.

In assessing Shin's credibility and the changes in his story, it is important to know that he has multiple scars consistent with extreme torture. Trauma victims like him tend to struggle with the truth, especially in the linear narrative form that journalists, judges, and policymakers are best able to understand. The memories of trauma victims are often fragmented and out of sequence, and the stories they tell can be shields behind which they try to hide.

'The most genuine narratives of going through political

violence are never completely coherent or finalized,' said Dr Stevan M. Weine, a specialist on the impact of political violence and a professor of psychiatry at the University of Illinois at Chicago. He has treated trauma and studied trauma victims from Bosnia, Kosovo, Central Asia, and Africa. Between conversations with Shin in Seoul, I telephoned Weine and told him about Shin's evolving story.

'When someone goes through profound trauma and I don't hear a disjointed story, I am suspicious,' he told me. 'Shin appears to have been exposed to prolonged and repeated torture. We can expect that this would have a major impact on every aspect of who he is, on his memory, his emotional regulation, his ability to relate to others, his willingness to trust, his sense of place in the world, and the way he gives his testimony.'

In *Escape from Camp 14*, I wrote that there was no way to fact-check many parts of Shin's story, since North Korea is largely closed to the outside world and it denies that political labour camps exist. But other gulag survivors had told me Shin knew things only an insider could know. Human rights investigators who had talked with scores of camp survivors found his testimony credible and precise. When this book appeared, Shin had already become a key primary source for major reports on the North Korean gulag.

Still, as I emphasized in the book, I worried about his capacity for truthfulness. I wrote that he had repeatedly lied to me. Two chapters in *Escape from Camp 14* present him as an unreliable narrator of his own life.

In retrospect, I should have done more to examine the psychological dimensions of his relation to truth. It would have

prepared me for what Shin disclosed in 2015, more than six years after we met and started working on the manuscript.

The story Shin now tells is considerably more complex – and in some ways more disturbing – than the one he told upon his arrival in South Korea in 2006. In the new version he escaped twice to China, not once. He lived in two bordering political prison camps, not just Camp 14.

In his revised story, Shin said he was born in Camp 14, a 'total control zone', but when he was six or seven the border of that camp shifted. His home village, he said, was then incorporated into Camp 18, the slightly less brutal prison next door. North Korean government records seem to support his new version, but do not conclusively prove it, as I will explain below. In any case, all the available evidence suggests that he was born and raised in a political prison.

In *Escape from Camp 14*, Shin said that when he was a small boy in the camp, he lived among children and adults who were destined to be worked to death as slaves without any possibility of release. As such, they were not allowed to see photographs of Great Leader Kim Il Sung or Dear Leader Kim Jong Il. But when his village became part of Camp 18, Shin said his status improved marginally. The food was no better, indeed he said there was less of it. Another Camp 18 survivor confirms this irony, saying that because Camp 14 had better farms, it always had slightly more food.

Under the rules of Camp 18, Shin did see photos of the Kims. He was also issued, for the first time, the uniform of a North Korean school pupil. While public executions for attempted escape were common in Camp 18, Shin said that as

he grew up, prisoners were paid with food coupons for their work and, over time, some were released and allowed to become ordinary residents of North Korea.

These revisions in his story, while significant, do not alter the evidence of torture on Shin's body. Indeed, he now says he was tortured more extensively by prison guards than he had previously been willing to admit.

In addition to being burned over a fire and hung by shackles from his ankles, which he had earlier described, he said guards used pliers to rip out his fingernails. Scars on his hands and the partial amputation of one finger support the claim.

'Shin's body shows more scars from torture than any camp survivor I know who has come to South Korea, and I have met almost all of them,' said Ahn Myeong Chul, a former North Korean prison guard who for seven years worked for the National Security Agency, known as the *Bowibu*, the feared political police force that runs the country's most notorious prisons, including Camp 14. Ahn is now executive director of NK Watch, a human rights group in Seoul, and knows Shin well.

'The scars prove to me that Shin was tortured at a *Bowibu* detention centre,' said Ahn, who sees Shin's scars as signature work of his previous employer.

Shin buried his memory of fingernail torture – and kept it from the world for nearly a decade – because he said it had been unbearable, physically and psychologically.

'I couldn't handle it,' he said. 'I tried to scrunch my fingers up so they couldn't pull out more fingernails.'

Shin said this infuriated the guards, who forcibly straightened out the middle finger on his right hand and smashed

the end of it with some kind of club. The blow effectively amputated the finger up to the first knuckle. Previously, Shin had said that guards cut off that part of his finger with a knife, as punishment for dropping a sewing machine in a camp uniform factory. But he has now said he made up that story, because he was ashamed of how he had been 'broken' by torture.

In 2010, Shin admitted to me that when he first arrived in South Korea, he concealed how his mother and brother got caught – and were later executed – for planning an escape from prison camp. They were caught, he told me, because he betrayed their plans to a guard. An extended account of that betrayal appears in *Escape from Camp 14*. In our new round of interviews, Shin changed the story again, saying his role in the executions was more shameful than he could bear to admit.

'I was jealous because my mother liked my brother more than me,' he said. 'My mother never liked me much. She beat me much more than my brother. She never paid attention to my birthday.'

Shin said that in 1996, after he snitched to a guard about the escape plans of his mother and brother, he put his thumbprint on a police statement he knew to be false. It stated that he had seen his mother and brother commit a murder. Shin said the document, which a guard asked him to sign, was important evidence for the execution. Shin was fifteen at the time, according to a North Korean government listing of his birth date, which says he was born on 19 November 1980. (Shin now says he is not sure what year he was born but that his father told him it was 1982.)

Shin has also acknowledged that there were some fictive elements in his former narrative. He did not live in a student dormitory in Camp 14 when he was a teenager; he lived with his father in Camp 18. During his second journey to the Chinese border, he was not 'shocked' to see North Koreans shopping in street markets. He had seen them shop before, during his first flight to China.

He said he altered dates and locations for major events, such as the age at which he was tortured; he was twenty-one, not fourteen. He changed the whereabouts of the execution of his mother and brother. It occurred at an execution site beside the Taedong River in Camp 18, not on the other side of that river at an execution site in Camp 14.

When Shin began telling his story to South Korean intelligence, to human rights investigators, and to the world's press, he said he had no idea that these details would later be considered important. He did not know what fiction or non-fiction was. He had never read a book. He said he only learned the concept of non-fiction when I told him that's what I had to write.

Shin said he had much to be ashamed of and even more to hide when powerful people in South Korea started asking him questions. So he shaped his answers to serve his needs, not those of government interrogators, or human rights organizations, or journalists like me.

As I have explained, trauma experts see nothing unusual in this. What is unusual is that his story made him an international celebrity.

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Some key elements of Shin's revised story have been unintentionally corroborated by North Korea itself, in press releases~~,~~ ~~statements at the United Nations,~~ and two propaganda videos released in the autumn of 2014.

That is when the government in Pyongyang, in a furious push to derail criticism of its human rights record, zeroed in on Shin, attacking him repeatedly by name and describing him as 'scum' and a 'parasite'.

In the process, North Korea confirmed that Shin's mother and brother were executed in 1996 for 'premeditated murder with grave consequences' and said Shin played a role in their punishment. A press release from North Korea's UN mission in New York said Shin did indeed escape twice to China. Between escapes, the release said, Shin failed to show 'true regret' and made no effort to 'redeem his crime'.

North Korea and the witnesses it showcased in its videos also accused Shin of being a 'criminal', a thief who fled the country after raping a thirteen-year-old girl. He categorically denies any rape, while acknowledging he did steal clothes and food while traveling across North Korea during his escapes to China. North Korea has not presented evidence that Shin was arrested or tried for rape, but says he fled to China after committing his crime. Videos from North Korea have also explained Shin's scars as the result of various mining accidents and a childhood mishap that spilled 'hot dog food' on his lower back when he was two.

In one government-released video, Shin was stunned to see his father, Shin Gyung Sub, whom he had thought was dead. The father insists in the video that neither he nor his son had ever lived in a 'so-called political prison camp'. But the father

himself also undermines that claim. He says that Shin was a young boy in the town of Pongchang, which at the time was inside the borders of a political prison.

North Korean records seem to support Shin's contention that he was born in a part of Camp 14 that was incorporated into Camp 18 when he was six or seven. The shift in administrative borders occurred in 1984, according to records located by Curtis Melvin, a researcher for the U.S.-Korea Institute at Johns Hopkins University.

Based on the limited information in these records, Melvin said Shin's story about being born and living as a small child in Camp 14 is 'plausible'. Researchers at two respected human rights groups in Seoul – the Citizens' Alliance for North Korean Human Rights and the Database Center for North Korean Human Rights – share this assessment. But records do not explicitly delineate camp borders. Instead, they show that Shin's home area was until 1984 part of Kaechon County, where Camp 14 is located. Then it came under the jurisdiction of Pukchang County, which administered Camp 18.

Ahn, the former prison guard, said it would have taken two or three years after the official change of county borders in 1984 before the political police in Camp 14 handed over control of Shin's home area to the less restrictive regular police who ran Camp 18. Ahn believes that during that time Shin would likely have been living in conditions very much like those described in *Escape from Camp 14*.

'Shin probably did grow up until he was six or seven as a very restricted prisoner,' Ahn said. He and other human rights groups say more research is necessary to determine with certainty whether Shin was indeed born in Camp 14. Yet by his

father's inadvertent admission, Shin was a child inside Camp 18 and lived just 1.3 miles from the borders of Camp 14.

After North Korea attacked Shin by name late in the autumn of 2014, the security authorities in South Korea began providing him with twenty-four-hour police protection. In the past, North Korea has sent assassins to Seoul to try to kill high-visibility defectors.

Before Shin arrived for the first time in South Korea in 2006, he said he spent several months in Shanghai, waiting inside the South Korean consulate for clearance to travel to Seoul. During that time he learned from consulate staff that he would have to give an account of his life to South Korea's National Intelligence Service.

When he heard about the coming interrogation, Shin was frightened and said he began to formulate a sanitized version of his life story. It omitted fingernail torture and his role in the execution of his mother and brother.

'It was a way of streamlining my story; it just happened,' he told me. 'In China I never wrote down anything, just worked it out in my head.'

Having composed this script, Shin stuck to it during weeks of questioning by South Korean intelligence. Matthew E. McMahon, then an interrogator from US Army intelligence, also questioned Shin and remembers him as being severely traumatized. But Sergeant Matthew E. McMahon also said that the story he heard from Shin was remarkably consistent with what he would say over and over again in future press interviews.

While the stories of many trauma victims tend to wander

around over time, Shin's did not. He kept it straight by writing it down as soon as he could. He did so in the Seoul offices of the Database Center for North Korean Human Rights, which gave him office space, a place to live, and two years of psychotherapy.

'It was Shin's idea to write his book and he did it by himself. We only corrected the spelling and grammar,' said Alice Sunyoung Choi, director of international communication for the Database Center, which published the Korean-language memoir in 2007, just a year after he arrived in South Korea. After that, Shin often instructed curious reporters to 'read my book.'

His one significant change in the script was with me in 2010, when we were winding up interviews for *Escape from Camp 14*. He told me that he had not been truthful about the reasons for the executions of his mother and brother. When Shin made this admission, I asked him what else he had been lying about. He claimed then that there was nothing else. But now he says he was on the brink of spilling his long-repressed secrets.

'I was beginning to tell you the truth, but I just stopped,' he said. 'It was too painful. There were parts I could not stand recalling. At that point, I made up my mind not to tell anyone the truth. I would have covered it up forever if my father hadn't appeared in the video.'

When the video featuring his father was posted on YouTube in October 2014, Shin struggled to suppress his alarm. For a while, he succeeded.

From my home in Seattle, I reached him and asked him to

explain what was going on. Why was his father saying that he and Shin had never been in a political prison? Shin said his father was under pressure to lie (which does seems likely) and that he was worried about what North Korea would to do him next. To explain himself, Shin wrote (with my editing help) an opinion piece for the *Washington Post*. In it, he asked North Korea to let him see his father, while insisting that he would not be silenced. Shin said nearly the same thing in a meeting with the editorial board of the *New York Times*.

The video, meanwhile, angered Camp 18 survivors in Seoul. They began to grumble and privately accused Shin of being a liar. Among them was Kim Hye Sook, who spent twenty-eight years in Camp 18 before being released and finding her way to South Korea in 2009. Like Shin, she has testified around the world and written a book about her life. Kim, who is sixty-two, recognized Shin's father in the video, as well as his uncle, who also appeared in it. She said she knew Shin's mother, having attended years of political 're-education' meetings with her in the camp. Kim also remembered watching the 1996 execution of Shin's mother and brother. (She says both were shot; Shin says only his brother was shot and his mother was hanged.)

The North Korean video confirmed Kim's long-held suspicion that Shin had grown up in Camp 18. When she and Shin had made joint appearances for human rights events, she felt Shin avoided talking to her about prison life. She found his behaviour suspicious. After seeing the video, she was furious. She now says she cannot believe anything he says. 'He gave North Korea an excuse to say we are all liars and to deny its human rights abuses,' she told me. 'Now, when I come forward

with my story, somebody might be suspicious of me. I have to watch my back.'

A few days after the video of his father appeared, Shin went to see Ahn, the former prison guard and human rights activist whom he had come to regard as his 'big brother'. Shin admitted he had lived in Camp 18 and conceded that other parts of his story were not accurate.

According to both men, Ahn advised Shin to wait a while before going public. He said they should remain silent until after the UN Security Council considered a General Assembly resolution that referred North Korea to the International Criminal Court on charges of crimes against humanity. The Security Council debate took place in ~~November~~ 2014, with no action taken.

As Shin now tells it, he escaped Camp 18 twice, once in the spring of 1999 and again in the late winter of 2000, crawling under the same section of electric fence both times. He barely felt any voltage in the fence the first time and none the second. ~~,~~According to Kim Hye Sook and the testimony of others who lived in the Camp 18, by the late 1990s the camp was a much less restrictive place than it had been in previous decades and parts of it were poorly guarded.

The first escape, Shin said, was suggested by his father, who gave his eighteen-year-old son a letter and told him to go to the home of Shin's aunt in Mundok County, a journey of about thirty miles. According to Shin, it took him two weeks to find the place, and when he arrived, camp guards were waiting for him. They brought him back to Camp 18 and sent him to a detention centre near the Taedong River, where he did

forced labour, including work at a nearby hydroelectric dam (as described in *Escape from Camp 14*). After about a year and a half, he said, he escaped again.

This time he made it to China (as North Korea acknowledges) and worked there cutting trees for four months before local police caught him. North Korea claims Shin was repatriated from China and 'transferred back to our law enforcement agencies' in 2002. Shin said the date was 2001.

Guards again took him back to Camp 18, and allowed him to see his father one last time. A description of this final and sullen leave-taking occurs in *Escape from Camp 14*, although the location and timeframe differ~~s~~ from ~~the one~~ Shin now describes. After seeing his father, Shin said he was driven across the Taedong River to a detention and torture facility inside Camp 14.

Shin located the building for me on Google Earth. He had located the same building for a 2012 interview with '60 Minutes'. According to former guard Ahn, the building appears to be surrounded by a high wall and looks like a National Security Agency facility. Ahn said he has seen similar buildings at four political prison camps. 'The place in Camp 14 that Shin has pinned as the location of his torture is clearly a detention centre. This is the most horrible place in the camp. There is usually a basement room used for torture. When a camp is closed, these are the first places guards blow up to remove evidence.'

After about a month of torture (Shin lost track of time), he spent six months in a detention centre cell, where he said an elderly prisoner helped him recover. Shin said he was then released into the general camp population. For the next three

years he worked in a mine, on a farm, and then in a uniform factory. Much of this, he said, is as described in *Escape from Camp 14*.

Shin's knowledge of the camp's geography and the function of its many buildings have impressed several human rights investigators. 'We can only tell you that we are certain that he had been in Camp 14 because of the things he knew about the operation of the camp and his knowledge of construction projects inside it,' said Alice Sunyoung Choi of the Database Center in Seoul. (His knowledge of Camp 18's geography and its buildings also squares with that of longtime resident Kim Hye Sook.)

Shin maintains that his January 2005 escape from Camp 14 occurred as described in this book, noting that the extraordinary scars on his legs were caused by that camp's high-voltage electric fence.

But some details of his escape differ from what he has said before: he was motivated to escape, he now says, because he had been informed that he was scheduled to be executed in February of that year. He also said he was not nearly as naive as he had earlier claimed to be about the world outside the camp's fence.

There are no witnesses to confirm any of this and some Camp 18 survivors, including Kim Hye Sook, have said Shin could not have escaped Camp 14 and made it all the way to China, since no one else is known to have done it. One Camp 18 survivor (who has declined to grant interviews) has told human rights activists that the inmate Shin says was his accomplice in escaping Camp 14 actually died elsewhere in a mine accident.

Ahn, too, has questions.

'I can understand that he might be able to get out of the camp because guards are not always alert,' he said. 'But his escape would have created an alert. How could he pass the security points in North Korea? How come no one caught him in train station?'

Shin said security forces did look for him in 2005, but he knew how to travel anonymously across North Korea because he had done it before, having used the same escape route in 2001. Until more evidence emerges, that is where his story stands, with Shin turning up in China in 2005.

Experts have known with certainty about the scale of suffering in the North Korean gulag since at least 2003, when eyewitness testimony was correlated with satellite pictures. Since then, as satellite imagery has been refined, there has been a flood of reports, white papers, and commission findings. Scores of camp survivors have given accounts of murder, rape, beatings, torture, slave labour, and starvation. But for much of the past decade the general public, especially in the United States, barely noticed.

This is not an anomaly. The suffering a totalitarian state secretly inflicts on its own people has historically been difficult for non-expert outsiders to comprehend or care about.

What can change public perception is a powerful story about one individual.

Consider Stalin's gulag. The Western world focused its attention on labour camps in the former Soviet Union only after the publication of *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich,* a short novel based on Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's eight years in

the gulag. Spare, quick to read, and emotionally explosive, the book became the single most searing indictment of the gulag, even though it appeared in 1962, nine years after Stalin died and the camps began to close.

Shin, of course, is no Solzhenitsyn. He is not a poet, a journalist, or a historian. Raised in a dysfunctional family in a secret prison, badly educated, and tortured, he is a flawed eyewitness to the savagery of the world's last totalitarian state. As he has often said of himself, he is an 'animal' slowly learning how to be a human being.

It is not his fault he became globally famous during that learning process. I am accountable for that, along with plenty of other journalists and human rights groups. It is our business to grab the attention of a mass audience and to focus it on horror in distant places. We know how to do it: tell a human story, shattering and short.

Shin's life is such a story. It is not fiction. It is journalism and history built around one young man's memory, as refracted through a collapsed scheme to hide from trauma, torture, and shame. It should now be read in the light of all that Shin is willing to acknowledge and correct. As such, it reveals the depravity that North Korea continues to deny.