

Seoul Train

DISCUSSION GUIDE



SEOUL TRAIN, by Jim Butterworth and Lisa Sleeth, is a gripping documentary exposé into the life-and-death struggle faced by North Korean refugees as they flee their homeland through China—which does not recognize their legal status as refugees. Their clandestine escape over hundreds of miles of Chinese territory via an “underground railroad” of safe houses and hidden routes, the refugees face imprisonment and death if captured and returned to North Korea. SEOUL TRAIN brings to light this humanitarian tragedy of a neglected people risking—and often losing—their lives for freedom.





FROM THE FILMMAKERS

In July 2003, we attended a presentation on North Korea. There we learned of the story of Seok Jae-hyun, a photographer for The New York Times who had gone to China to document the plight of North Korean refugees. Unfortunately, things went bad: the Chinese arrested all involved, imprisoning Seok and forcibly repatriating the refugees.

When we learned about this incident and the attendant human rights crisis in North Korea, we were shocked that we had never heard about it, much less read about it in the Times. With millions of people dead, hundreds dying daily and a dearth of press coverage or international attention, we knew that the issue needed advocacy. That's when we decided to use the power of the media to help make a difference.

As first-time filmmakers (Lisa is a critical care nurse and Jim is a businessman), our first task was to learn how to make a film...and we'd never even touched a camcorder before! We practiced our camera skills by interviewing one another and the local kids in our small mountain town in Colorado. Then, in October 2003, we took leaves from our jobs and headed for Seoul. We spent a total of two months in the Koreas and China living with and among the activists in the Underground Railroad.

Our journey took us to the Tumen River, which forms the border between China and North Korea. It is this narrow slice of water, which freezes over in the winter months, that separates the misery the refugees endure at home and their potential for freedom. Guarding the border, however, are the omnipresent soldiers with their sniper rifles and AK-47s. North Korea—nicknamed The Hermit Kingdom because no one can leave nor get in—was only accessible to the daring, brave North Koreans who had successfully escaped once, and were willing to go back to document the horrors inside. Had they been caught, they would have been summarily executed. It is due to their courage that *SEOUL TRAIN* has the bleak shots from inside North Korea.

Many people ask us if we ever felt afraid for our safety. Our main concern was actually more for the safety of the activists and refugees with whom we came in contact. We often posed as tourists, and used covert techniques – such as spy cams and a camcorder broken down to its bare parts – to film in places where it would bring unwanted attention or would not be allowed. Also, since they could go places we couldn't, the activists entrusted us with their own footage from the Underground Railroad. It is this footage that ultimately makes *SEOUL TRAIN* so heart wrenching.

When we returned home in December 2003, we knew that *SEOUL TRAIN* was no longer our little "home movie." We also returned home with a moral obligation to make this footage public...it had been entrusted to us, and it was up to us to make something of it. A friend of ours then put us in touch with the final piece of the puzzle: Aaron Lubarsky. Aaron had just won the 2003 Primetime Emmy for Best Documentary Editing, and was a hot commodity in the film industry. Despite this, Aaron turned down much more lucrative offers and jumped at the chance to be a part of this effort. Together, the three of us formed the perfect balance and creative tension that comes through in the film.

It is important to note that every effort was made to protect the identities and activities of the activists and refugees, as their continued success and safety depends upon it. Unfortunately, the fate is sealed for many of the refugees featured in the film. Now, the best that can be done for them is to show the world this crisis to prevent the same from happening to others.

SEOUL TRAIN is dedicated to the selfless activists that put themselves in harms way, using their own resources, and risking torture and imprisonment in North Korea and remote parts of China. *SEOUL TRAIN* is also dedicated to the memory of those refugees that have been sent back to North Korea to a horrific fate.

— LISA SLEETH & JIM BUTTERWORTH



THE FILM

Using smuggled footage and clandestine interviews with human rights activists and refugees, *SEOUL TRAIN* documents the experience of defectors using a modern-day underground railroad to get out of North Korea. As the film shows, however, crossing the North Korean border into China does not guarantee safety or freedom. To the contrary, where human rights advocates see refugees seeking asylum, the Chinese government sees illegal immigrants. That designation leaves the North Koreans subject to arrest and forced repatriation.

The danger of imprisonment, torture and execution faced by those who are forced back to North Korea leaves viewers pondering a humanitarian dilemma. What is the appropriate response to human suffering when the circumstances involve complex geopolitical issues, including questions of sovereignty, the role of the United Nations, and the potential of nuclear warfare? Ultimately, each of us who lives in freedom must ask whether our good fortune obligates us to act on behalf of those who live without freedom, and if so how?

People Who Appear in *SEOUL TRAIN*

Tim Peters—Founding Director, Helping Hands Korea

Chun Ki-won—Pastor and underground railroad activist

Marine Buissonnière—Secretary General, Doctors Without Borders

Dr. Chung Byung-ho—Professor of Cultural Anthropology, Hanyang University

Suzanne Scholte—Vice Chairman, North Korea Freedom Coalition

Senator Sam Brownback—(R) Senator from Kansas and primary sponsor of legislation that became the North Korea Human Rights Act of 2004

Moon Kook-han—Underground railroad activist

Ron Redmond—UNHCR spokesperson

And the refugees:

With Chun Ki-won: Nam Chun-mi, Kim Ji-sung, Roh Myung-ok, Chung Eun-mi, Chung Eun-chul, Ahn Soon-ok, Kim Young-ju, Kim Jun-il, Kim Kwang-il, Rah Young-shik, Rhyu Mi-hwa, Han Sol-hee

The Han-mi Family: Kim Sung-kook, Lee Sun-hi, Kim Kwan-chul, Kim Han-mi, Chung Kyong-suk

The MoFA Seven: An Choi-su, Cho Song-hee, Kim (Byul) Hong, Kim Jae-gon, Kim Jong-nam, Kim Mi-young, Ko Dae-chang



BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Slightly smaller than the State of Mississippi, The Democratic People's Republic of Korea (North Korea) has been a totalitarian dictatorship under the rule of Kim Il-sung or his son, Kim Jong-il since Korea was split into North and South following World War II. 99% of the nation's 22 million people are literate. About one million serve in the military,

The government allocates scarce resources according to a formula rewarding the "loyal" and punishing the hostile. When a famine hit in the mid-1990s, that policy led to widespread starvation, by some estimates killing about 10% of the population and sending hundreds of thousands clandestinely over the 1400km Chinese border, the only practical route out of North Korea. The UN World Food Program and UNICEF, two of the few organizations still permitted in from the outside, report that more than 20% of North Korean young children are chronically malnourished. Human Rights Watch has described North Korea as "the world's largest prison camp." There is no freedom of press, religion, assembly or movement. Those who criticize the government or "steal" food face detention, forced labor, torture and even public execution. The UN Commission on Human Rights has called for basic respect of human rights, and has appointed investigators, but the investigators have been denied entry into the country.

An estimated 50,000-300,000 North Korean refugees have crossed the border into China, many of whom are women and children. Many of the refugees hope to reunite with family and settle in South Korea, but most are merely trying to survive. The Chinese government, however, defines them as "illegal immigrants" seeking economic opportunity rather than as refugees deserving of protection and asylum.

Perhaps afraid that toleration of the influx of refugees might lead to a collapse of the North Korean regime, the Chinese hunt down and forcibly repatriate North Korean refugees despite official protests from the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). The UNHCR has declared that the defectors are indeed legal "refugees," and confirms that those returned face incarceration, torture and/or death. Many human rights activists and government officials, however, have criticized UNHCR's efforts as being too weak to address this critical situation.

Official U.S. response is split. Congress unanimously passed the North Korea Human Rights Act of 2004, but has yet to appropriate funding for it. The White House has appointed a Special Envoy for Human rights in North Korea, but has chosen not to raise human rights in official diplomatic exchanges with North Korea. The United States has also been reluctant to anger China, which it sees as an important trading partner and which has been a traditional ally of North Korea.

SOURCES: CIA WORLD FACTBOOK, HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH, AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL, UNHCR

THINKING MORE DEEPLY

Before Viewing

What do you know about North Korea and what are your sources of information? Do you think your sources are reliable? Why or why not?

What responsibility, if any, do citizens of the free world have to assure basic human rights for those who do not live freely? What kinds of steps are appropriate for people to take when the human rights violations involve people outside of the country in which you live?

Comparisons

Compare the underground railroad you see in SEOUL TRAIN with the Underground Railroad in the U.S. used by blacks in the 18th and 19th century to escape slavery? What is similar and what is different?

Marine Buissonnière of Doctors Without Borders describes Chun Ki-won as an "Asian Schindler." How is the situation of the North Koreans similar to and different from the situation faced by Jews, gays, minorities, communists, the disabled and others targeted for extermination by the Nazis during World War II?

What kinds of circumstances lead people to take the kinds of risks you see taken by the activists and refugees in the film? If you were suffering, what might make you decide to risk your life and leave your home? What might make you choose to stay?

What was your impression of the South Korean statue memorializing the Korean Conflict? How is it like or unlike other war memorials you have seen? What message do you think it sends about the war and relations between South and North?

Human Rights and International Policy

What did you learn from the film about the role of media and visibility in human rights struggles? What impact did the presence of a video camera have on the experiences of the MoFA Seven, the Han-mi Family and the Chun Ki-won group? Why do you think this situation has not received greater media coverage?

Who should have the authority to define whether North Koreans that have crossed the border into China are "refugees" (which would entitle them to certain protections) or "illegal immigrants" (subject to arrest and forced repatriation)? What should happen in situations where local law, bi-lateral agreements (e.g., between China and North Korea), and international law conflict? What might be the implication for U.S. laws if it insists that international law should govern this situation?

It is clear that the governments of North Korea and China bear responsibility for the safety of the defectors and that North Korea is responsible to feed its citizens. Are we also responsible? If so, what is the extent of our responsibility and what is the source of our obligation? If we knew that much of our aid was being diverted to feed the North Korean military, should we still send aid even though a small percentage actually reaches those in need?

Speakers in the film give pro & con arguments for locating the 2008 Olympics in Beijing, China. Whose arguments do you find more convincing, those who say it is an opportunity for visibility and openness (and thus possibly change) or those who say that awarding the games to China sanctions their policies and practices. If you had been on the Olympic Committee, how would you have voted on the Beijing bid and why?



SUGGESTIONS FOR ACTION

Together with other audience members, brainstorm actions that you might take as an individual and that people might do as a group. You might segue into brainstorming with the challenge that Senator Sam Brownback poses in the film:

Senator Sam Brownback says, "We're going to look back in ten years when North Korea opens up. We're going to see millions of people dead and we're going to say, 'Why didn't you act? Why didn't you do something?'" How might you pre-empt Brownback's challenge?

If you need help getting started, you might begin your list with these suggestions:

Organize additional screenings and discussions of SEOUL TRAIN. Venues might include your school, religious community, civic group, or club.

Investigate the status of legislation about human rights in North Korea, like the North Korea Human Rights Act of 2004. Carefully study the legislation and let your representatives know whether you think that Congress should fund this Act.

Help North Korean refugees tell their stories. Tape the stories of North Koreans who have made their way to your community and help them find a place on the web to post the video or audio files.

Plan actions around the 2008 Olympic Games in Beijing to provide visibility for North Koreans seeking asylum. Develop press releases on the issue to share with media covering the games. Ask them to cover the story of the refugees.

Join a chapter of a human rights organization that works to help North Koreans.

For additional outreach ideas, visit itvs.org, the website of the Independent Television Service. For local information, check the website of your PBS station.

Before you leave this event, commit yourself to pursue one item from the brainstorm list.

RESOURCES FOR FURTHER STUDY AND ACTION

www.seoultrain.com - The official website of the film includes in-depth background information on the crisis, links to UN-related and other documents, lists of asylum seekers and more.

www.amnestyusa.org - Though Amnesty International has been denied official access to North Korea since 1995, the human rights watchdog tracks conditions, including updates on negotiations regarding the country's nuclear status.

www.hrw.org - The website of Human Rights Watch includes reports about human rights in North Korea and China, as well as recommendations for action.

www.hrnk.org - The website for the U.S. Committee for Human Rights in North Korea (HRNK) includes two seminal reports: "The Hidden Gulag: Exposing North Korea's Prison Camps" and "Hunger and Human Rights: The Politics of Famine in North Korea."

www.nkfreedom.org - Spokespeople from the North Korea Freedom Coalition are featured in SEOUL TRAIN. The website includes general information on human rights in North Korea as well as updates on the organization's current activities.

www.brownback.senate.gov/LINorthKorea.cfm - The official website of Senator Sam Brownback, who is interviewed in the film, details his positions and activities relative to North Korea, as well as links to statements from other U.S. government officials and agencies.

www.nkzone.org - NKZone provides news and a blog about North Korea that includes pro and con voices on specific strategies and proposed solutions.

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ITVS COMMUNITY is the national community engagement program of Independent Lens. ITVS Community works to leverage the unique and timely content of IL's award-winning independent films to build stronger connections among leading organizations, local communities, and public television stations around key social issues and create more opportunities for civic engagement and positive social change.