**“Nothing to Envy,” by Barbara Demick**

**Level 3 Written Text Study Notes**

**Genre:** Part-novelization (2009) of interviews with refugees from Chongjin, North Korea.

**Author:** Written by Los Angeles Times journalist, Barbara Demick.

**Acknowledgements:** In 2010, the book was awarded the BBC Samuel Johnson Prize for Non-Fiction. It was also a non-fiction finalist for the National Book Award in the United States in 2010.

**Overview**

Demick interviewed more than **100 defectors**and chose to focus on **Chongjin** because it is likely to be more representative than the capital **Pyongyang**. The events covered include **the**[**famine of the 1990s**](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/North_Korean_famine), with the final chapters describing the route the main characters took to [**Seoul**](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Seoul).

* A “defector” gives up their allegiance to their country and takes up residence in another.
* **Chŏngjin** is the capital of [North Korea](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/North_Korea)'s North Hamgyong Province and the country's third largest city. It is sometimes called the *City of Iron*.
* In the 1930s, [Nippon Steel](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nippon_Steel) built a large [steel mill](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Steel_mill), the Seishin Iron and Steel Works, in the town.
* During the **North Korean famine**of the 1990s, Chongjin was one of the worst affected locations in the country; death rates may have been as high as 20 percent.[[1]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chongjin#cite_note-nk-1) Conditions there remain poor in terms of food availability.
* **Chongjin camp** is a lifetime prison. Like the other political prison camps it is controlled by the state security agency. Chongjin camp is only one big prison building complex similar to the reeducation camps. The camp is around 500 m long and 500 m wide, surrounded by high walls and fences and equipped with guard towers. The number of prisoners is estimated to be between 3000 and 5000.

The main purpose of the camp is to isolate political prisoners from society. The prisoners are exploited for hard labor to be performed in the prison factories. Popular North Korean consumer products like Kalmaegi bicycles are manufactured by prisoners using hand tools.

Chongjin camp as a top-level political prisoner camp, therefore harsh conditions can be assumed.

* **Pyongyang** (the national capital) is considered a **potemkin village:** built solely to deceive others into thinking that a situation is better than it really is. The North Korean government divides the population into many classes, and only high-class elites are permitted to live in Pyongyang.

The **six main characters/interviewees** of the bookare:

* **Mrs. Song** – a pro-regime housewife, head of the block's ***inminban***

***inmin-ban*** means "neighbourhood units" or "people's units" and is a neighbourhood watch-like form of cooperative local organization in North Korea. No North Korean person exists outside the **inminban** system: everyone is a member.

* **Oak-hee** – Mrs. Song's rebellious, yet eventually enterprising, daughter
* **Mi-ran** – daughter of a **kaolin**(a clay mineral) miner, a South Korean **POW** (prisoner of war), so with bad ***songbun***disqualifying her from advancement

***songbun***is the system of ascribed status used in North Korea. Based on political, social, and economic background for direct ancestors as well as behavior by relatives, **songbun** is used to determine whether an individual is trusted with responsibility, is given opportunities within North Korea.

* **Jun-sang** – a student with **Zainichi Korean**ancestry and Mi-ran's boyfriend in North Korea

**Zainichi Korean- Koreans in Japan,** can trace their displacement to the early 20th century when Korea was under Japanese rule. In 1910, as the result of the Japan–Korea Annexation Treaty, all Korean people became the nation of the [Empire of Japan](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Empire_of_Japan). During World War II, a large number of Koreans were also conscripted by Japan. Another wave of migration started after South Korea was devastated by the Korean War in the 1950s.

* **Kim Hyuck** – a street-boy whose father commits him to an orphanage
* **Dr. Kim** – a doctor with relatives in China

**Dr. Kim** is another featured character who, through much of the book, also considers herself an ardent loyalist to North Korean socialism. As a doctor, particularly a busy one in a nation that has many people suffering from the effects of chronic starvation, lack of modern or even basic medicine, corruption and bribery, her skills are in demand and she is relatively higher on the social class compared to other characters in the text. Upon escaping to China in order to avoid impending starvation, Dr. Kim experiences a stark revelation:

“She still wanted to believe that her country was the best place in the world. The beliefs she had cherished for a lifetime would be vindicated. But now she couldn't deny what was staring her plainly in the face: dogs in China ate better than doctors in North Korea.”

**Writing style**

Demick's writing represents a **well-researched** body of work about lives from a secretive country, with enough **personal details of daily life** in North Korea not commonly found. **Facts are presented** to portray **an accurate image of the state and plight North Koreans have faced**, but also mentions **brighter moments such hardships can create**. For example, the author highlights a character's fond memories of courtship, in some ways only made possible by the power-outs and lack of electricity so common in the nation.

**Facts about conditions** are provided and presented in an **informative and telling journalistic style**. Keen insight is also provided into the **personal experiences**, **attitudes** and **views about events**, such as one most North Koreans remember, of what it was like for them as individuals on the day Kim Il Sung died, and how compulsive and competitive massive weeping rallies became in the days that followed. Such depictions of a deteriorating society are contrasted and weighed against personal loyalties.

**Content**

Demick describes the harsh experiences her subjects faced in the North Korean Famine of the 1990s. This famine and an economic crisis is known as the **"**[**Arduous March**](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arduous_March)**.”** The famine stemmed from a variety of factors: economic mismanagement, the loss of Soviet support caused food production and imports to decline rapidly and a series of floods and droughts exacerbated the crisis. Estimates of the death toll vary widely. Out of a total population of approximately 22 million, somewhere between 240,000 and 3,500,000 North Koreans died from starvation or hunger-related illnesses, with the deaths peaking in 1997. Recent research suggests that the likely number of excess deaths between 1993 and 2000 was about 330,000.

"Absurd" details are often used in the nation to show the catalysts for great calamities: "Along with rice and corn, soybeans have been banned from the market with the absurd explanation that they might be taken into China and resold to the enemy in South Korea." (p. 287) "The North Korean government offered a variety of explanations, from the patently absurd to the barely plausible." (p. 69) The name of the city where the featured interviewed characters originate from, Chongjin, means "clear river crossing", a strictly prohibited act of treason for its residents pertaining to the border between North Korea and China, yet risked by the book's characters.