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The Secret History of Kim Jong Il

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Few people have the chance to watch a shy young man grow into a ruthless dictator—and live to talk about it. But, for one North Korean professor, Kim Jong Il is much more than the man holding his country hostage. He’s a former student.



[Left] AFP/Getty Images

Our father: North Koreans revere Kim Il Sung as God, and Kim Jong Il as Jesus. They mark this year as 97, the number of years since the Great Leader’s birth.

Web Extra: For a photo essay tracing the notorious and bizarre moments of Kim Jong Il’s life, visit: ForeignPolicy.com/extras/kim

I first met Kim Jong Il in October 1959. He was a senior at the elite Namsan Senior High School, and I was a 27-year-old professor of Russian at the Pyongyang University of Education. I also happened to have been chosen as a private tutor for the family of North Korean President Kim Il Sung. One day, the Great Leader remarked that he found his son’s Russian to be very poor and told me to go to his school and evaluate both Kim Jong Il’s proficiency and the quality of Russian education there. Handpicked by Joseph Stalin to rule over North Korea and a fluent Russian speaker

himself, Kim Il Sung deemed study of the language essential to relations with the Soviet Union, North Korea’s biggest political, economic, and military patron. At the school, I attended every Russian class, made evaluations, and then summoned the 17-year-old Kim Jong Il into the principal’s office. The principal, one of the school’s Russian teachers, and I, in accordance with Kim Il Sung’s orders, jointly administered an oral Russian exam for Kim Jong Il.

Just a young student at the time, the examinee appeared to be extremely nervous sitting alone for an oral exam before the three of us—especially one arranged at his father’s behest. The shy boy with puffy, red cheeks responded meekly to each question I posed.

“Please open the book, *Ri Su Bok, the North Korean Matrosov*, and translate it,” I told Kim.

He proceeded to read passages slowly from the book and translate them into Korean. His translations were not outstanding, but he managed to read and translate the text without making an error.

After a while I said, "Please summarize the contents of the book."

"You mean in Korean?" Kim asked.

"No. It should be in Russian, of course," I replied.

Looking a bit flustered, he began to speak in halting Russian. His spoken Russian seemed to lag behind his reading and translation.

"OK. Next I will test you on noun/adjective inflection, verb tense, and the first/second/third-person form."

When his father ordered me to evaluate Kim's Russian, he had praised his son's grammatical skills. He was right. When I rapidly threw out words at him, he replied without the slightest hesitation.

"Finally, I will test you on Russian conversation. Please listen to my questions and remarks and respond accordingly." I asked Kim Jong Il routine questions like his name and birthday, the date and day of the week, and the weather, yet he had a hard time responding. During the final conversation phase, he blushed and beads of sweat gathered on his forehead. Without ever boasting that he was the son of the Great Leader, Kim Jong Il patiently endured the exam.

My evaluation of Russian education at Namsan High School was that the instruction of spoken language had fallen behind that of grammar. When informed of my finding, Kim Il Sung became irate and demanded that any Russian teacher at Namsan High School who was not fluent in Russian be dismissed. I recommended a new, conversation-focused Russian program and suggested holding the annual nationwide Russian teachers' convention at Namsan the following year.

The following January, Russian teachers from across the nation convened at the high school. At the convention, Kim Jong Il showed off his new Russian skills with confidence. The combination of a new curriculum and the prodding by his father had paid off: Kim's nervous, diffident demeanor from the exam a few months back had disappeared. As an educator, I was quite gratified by his impressive progress.

Nearly 50 years have passed since the day I administered that test, but I still remember the questions I posed to Kim Jong Il, and the answers he gave in his amateur Russian: "I love and respect my father more than anyone else." "I plan to enroll in the Kim Il Sung University upon graduation from Namsan Senior High School." "I enjoy watching films more than playing sports."

It doesn't sound like an extraordinary moment. Just a teacher and a student behaving as they would anywhere. Of course, I've seen enough now to know just how far from ordinary anything about North Korea ever is.

Had I died fighting the Americans in the Korean War—which I almost did—I might not have ever come to know just how morally bankrupt were the ideals I was defending. But I survived. I went to college. I learned Russian. I was lucky enough to teach the language I loved to generations of students, some of whom went on to hold positions of power and influence throughout the country. I became dean of the foreign-language department. I wasn't particularly wealthy or privileged. But, through my travels beyond

the Hermit Kingdom, and my contacts, and that special secret responsibility of tutoring Kim Il Sung's family for 20 years, I did have something most of my fellow citizens never did and still don't: a window through which to understand the dynasty that continues to terrorize North Korea.

I wish I could argue that the shy and determined young man I first met that October day is the real person behind the cruel and mercurial dictator the rest of the world now knows him to be. But too much has happened since then.

In 1991, during a stint as a visiting professor in Moscow, I was approached by a South Korean agent. He brought me incredible news. He could arrange a meeting with my older sister, who had fled to the South during the Korean War and later moved to Chicago. Arranged by South Korea's national intelligence agency, it would be the first time we had seen each other in more than 40 years. All that time, we thought the other was dead. I was overcome with emotion. She begged me to come back to the United States with her and become a minister—our mother's dying wish for me. Although I could not return with my sister, it was one of the happiest moments of my life.

Our joy was short-lived. Another agent who had allowed us to use his house as a meeting spot was, in fact, a double agent working for the North. I received instructions from the government to return home the very next day. But I knew very well I couldn't; I would be killed as a traitor. I anguished over what my failure to appear would mean for my family back in Pyongyang. It's bad enough for a soldier or a student to defect. But I knew intimate details of the ruling family's inner circles. Surely they would view my betrayal as a personal insult.

I never returned to North Korea, and I never saw my family again. A few years later, I heard from a well-placed South Korean minister that my family had been sent to a gulag and murdered, the innocent victims of my treasonous crime. To this day, I know nothing of the details of their deaths, or whether they blamed me as they perished.

I ache when I imagine what Kim Jong Il did to my family. So many times, I've imagined killing him and then killing myself. Countless days and nights I have pounded my chest with guilt and grief, unable to forgive myself for the ghastly fate that I have brought my beloved wife—my lifelong companion—our daughters and son, their spouses, and even our dear grandchildren.

But I am willing to let go of my painful grievance against Kim Jong Il. My only wish is that he opens North Korea's doors and lets the hungry, tired people enjoy the kind of freedom and abundance that South Koreans, Americans, and so many others do. Until then, I will let the rest of the world see what I've seen: a young, innocent boy who turned into a monster, and a country with so much promise transformed into a concentration camp.

SCHOOL'S OUT FOREVER

In September 1973, Kim Jong Il's daughter, Sul Song, was to enroll at Namsan Primary School. Surrounded by tall, green poplar trees where birds rested and sang, the school had the air of a natural park. Beyond the rear of the school's stadium atop Haebang Hill sat the mansions of the highest officials.

Its pastoral setting was reserved for children of the elite—party officials above the rank of vice minister. They enjoyed all the perks that come with a rarefied spot in North Korean society: the best teachers, the best facilities, and just a few days of mandatory farm work every spring (as opposed to the average 60 to

90 days). Graduates of Namsan were guaranteed a spot at any university of their choice and an open door to a successful career. Isolated from the children of ordinary people, the students at Namsan would go on to become officials of the party and state.

Naturally, Kim Il Sung's children had studied at Namsan, including Kim Jong Il. Throughout his years there, Kim was a rather ordinary student. From academics and art to sports and extracurricular activities, he excelled in none. He made few friends. Upon graduation, Kim and his siblings all enrolled at Kim Il Sung University. His daughter's life was planned out much the same way—until that September day.

The school's staff waited by the entrance gate with flower bouquets in hand. As the minutes passed and the bell rang, Sul Song failed to show up. The staff grew increasingly anxious. One hour later, the school received the following one-line notification from state authorities: "Kim Sul Song will not enroll in Namsan School." Disappointed, the teachers and staff, who had been preparing for Kim Sul Song's enrollment, were simply left to wonder if she would be studying abroad instead.



[Left] GETTY IMAGES

The nuclear family: Talk of Kim Jong Il's home life is forbidden in North Korea.

They didn't have much time to linger: That day also marked the enrollment of another important first-grader. He was none other than Kim Min Chul, the nephew of Kim Il Sung's second wife. I remember that day extremely well, for I had been selected to evaluate the 6-year-old child's aptitude for advanced education. That day, Kim Il Sung's mother-in-law came to see her beloved grandson begin his schooling. Several other relatives milled about, and the school bustled with the unusual presence of so many important people.

Kim Jong Il was incensed to know that his only daughter would be sharing the spotlight throughout her early education with a child from the "side branches," those relatives who lay outside the main family line. So, he had decided to hire a private tutor for his daughter rather than send her to Namsan. Withdrawing his daughter from the school was a public revelation of his hostility toward his extended family, but, on its own, it wouldn't eliminate those potential rivals to his own children. Which is why Kim Jong Il had his alma mater, where he had spent so much of his youth, blown up.

Several years later, in 1982, as he was consolidating power within the party, Kim Il Sung's mother-in-law (and a close friend of mine) described how Kim Jong Il finally executed his plan. First, he brought up the school at a meeting of high officials.

"Comrades, what do you think of the fact that Namsan School is located right in front of our Central Party office building?"

His sycophants got the message.

"Dear Comrade Leader, is it not advisable to have a school inside the Central Party district?" was a typical response. "I think it best that Namsan School find another site and be relocated."

Kim Jong Il became more and more pleased with each nod of agreement.

“I have thought so for some time. I have long believed that the presence of a school within the party district is inappropriate, and I am opposed to having party officials’ children educated at a special school like Namsan. Why should party officials receive special consideration, and why should their children be educated by themselves, cut off from the rest of the people? Let’s put an end to dividing the party officials and the general public.”

Now, the original intent behind the school was to sequester the children of high officials in an attempt to thwart the spread of sensitive state secrets. But, as in so many communist societies, the school actually served to keep the lavish lifestyles of high officials hidden from the rest of the population. While the children of ordinary North Koreans ate cornmeal with soybean soup and soy sauce chemically made from soybean dregs and unseasoned kimchi, the students of Namsan ate high-grade white rice with meat, fish, and eggs. Should the wider population discover such a contrast in lifestyles, the image of the socialist state was bound to suffer.

A few nights after Kim’s meeting, the Namsan School was blown up by a demolition squad of the North Korean Army. On the very same plot of land, a new office building was erected. It would house the party’s Organization and Guidance Bureau. As the Namsan School vanished into thin air, so too disappeared the hopes of the school’s teachers and staff, students, and parents of students who had looked to Kim’s other relatives as potential successors to Kim Il Sung. By demolishing the school, Kim Jong Il was effectively declaring that he, and only he, was the rightful successor.

Even today, long after becoming the sole supreme leader of North Korea, Kim refuses to allow graduates of the Namsan School in his inner circle. After all, those who have known Kim Jong Il since youth are bound to see him as human—not the center of a god-like cult of personality.

‘A WORLD WITHOUT NORTH KOREA NEED NOT SURVIVE’

At the Three Revolutions Exhibition Hall in northwestern Pyongyang, there hangs a big sign that reads, “A world without North Korea need not survive.” What do these words mean? And what do they tell us, if anything, about Kim Jong Il’s military mind?

In late 1993, when North Korea was gearing up to withdraw from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, fears of an imminent war broke out across the Korean Peninsula. The eyes of the world were firmly fixed on the region. Not a day passed without some international coverage of the North Korean nuclear crisis.

In the midst of such concerns, Kim Il Sung convened a meeting of all his military officers above the rank of commanding general. One general who was in the room later explained what happened next. Kim posed to his generals the following question: “The American scoundrels are about to start a war against us. Will we be able to defeat them?”

The generals replied without hesitation: “Yes, we can win!” “When have we ever lost a war?” “We shall win every battle!” “How can we ever lose when we have you, Commander of Steel, our Great Leader, to lead us?” “Oh, Great Leader! Just give us the order!” “In a single breath we will rush to the South, drive out the American imperialists, and unify the fatherland!”

Despite such vigorous displays of bravado, Kim Il Sung did not appear satisfied. “That’s all very well,” he replied. “But what if we lose? What shall we do if we lose?”

Kim Il Sung’s prodding was unexpected. The moment that their Great Leader uttered the word “lose,” the generals’ lips closed and remained tightly shut. As they sat still in extreme anxiety, the 51-year-old Kim Jong Il suddenly stood up. Raising his clenched fists, Kim yelled out, “Great Leader! I will be sure to destroy the Earth! What good is this Earth without North Korea?”

Kim Il Sung looked at his eldest son and smiled.

“That is surely the answer. I am pleased to see that a new North Korean general has been born at this very gathering. Henceforth, I transfer to you the operational command of the North Korean military.”

A short while later, Kim Jong Il was named the commander in chief of the Korean People’s Army. And a big sign inscribed with Kim Jong Il’s words, “A world without North Korea need not survive,” was duly installed at the exhibition hall, the nation’s flagship display of achievements in industry, technology, engineering, and agriculture.

In the 1990s, after the fall of the Soviet Union, and with a tide of democratization and reform spreading across the world, Kim Jong Il chose to buck the trend and implement a “military-first policy.” True to his familiar slogan, “The military is the core force of the revolution and the pillar of the state,” Kim called for the militarization of the entire society. He believed that even though North Korea was a small state, he could stabilize the nation and make the country powerful and prosperous by growing the military.

Today, just as he hoped, Kim Jong Il’s vision has been realized—albeit through a continuing policy of military extortion. Whereas international trade and finance have only played a marginal role in North Korea’s economy and security, Kim has managed to extract resources from wealthier and stronger states by manufacturing crises and generating international instability. His brand of nuclear blackmail is a virtual guarantor of bottomless international aid for the world’s most militarized society.

‘PARADISE ON EARTH’

Living under a totalitarian regime requires a daily suspension of disbelief. Nowhere is that more true today than in North Korea, where otherwise ethical people contort themselves into untenable moral positions because they’ve bought into the oft-repeated notion that their country is “Paradise on Earth.” Simply to survive in North Korea, citizens must believe they are living in a chosen land. And when ideological indoctrination morphs into reality, the dictator need not even be nearby to spread fear. Not if average people will do his bidding for him.

All of which is bad news for those who don’t fit into Kim Jong Il’s ideal of a healthy, vital citizenry. In the people’s paradise that is North Korea, disabled—even short—people are considered subhuman. In 1989, Pyongyang hosted the World Festival of Youth and Students. In preparing for the international gathering, the entire nation was encouraged to outdo South Korea’s hosting of the Summer Olympic Games the year before. Pyongyang’s event had to be bigger and more glamorous. One such method was to purify the revolutionary capital of Pyongyang of disabled people.

Six months before the festival, the government rounded up all disabled residents of Pyongyang and sent them away from the capital to remote villages. The majority were clockmakers, seal engravers,

locksmiths, and cobblers who made their living in the city. Overnight, they were forcibly deprived of the lives they had known.

I saw this policy of “purification” up close. I have an old friend who, upon graduation from the Pyongyang University of Medicine, built a career in the state Academy of Medical Science. We were classmates at Heungnam High School and fought together in the Korean War. We were like brothers. One day during May 1989, he visited me at home looking deeply upset.

“What’s troubling you? You look very distressed,” I said to my friend.

“Well, I’m OK, I guess . . . but I’ve done a terrible thing. An abhorrent thing.”

“What do you mean? You aren’t a bad person.”

His eyes welled with tears.

“I have made cripples out of normal, healthy people and sent them away for good,” he said. “It is inhumane, what I have done. I shall never be able to hold my head up again.”

My friend, a well-connected physician at the time, told me that he had been ordered by the Communist Party to pick out the shortest residents of Pyongyang and South Pyongan province. Against his conscience, he went out to those areas and had local party representatives distribute propaganda pamphlets. They claimed that the state had developed a drug that could raise a person’s height and was recruiting people to receive the new treatment. In just two days, thousands gathered to take the new drug.

My friend explained how he picked out the shortest among the large group. He told the crowd that the drug would best take effect when consumed regularly in an environment with clean air. The people willingly, and without the slightest suspicion, hopped aboard two ships—women in one, men in the other. Separately, they were sent away to different uninhabited islands in an attempt to end their “substandard” genes from repeating in a new generation. Left for dead, none of the people made it back home. They were forced to spend the rest of their lives separated from their families and far from civilization.

“I can hardly believe that I’ve done such a terrible thing,” he told me.

My friend, who still lives in North Korea, will spend the rest of his days tormented with guilt. At the same time, he did not forget to beg me over and over that this incident was a state secret and that I was not to tell a soul, not even my wife. I kept his secret for some 16 years. There seems little point now in protecting a party, a government, and a leader that failed to do the same for its people.

WITNESS TO HISTORY

In late June, the United States took the dramatic and highly symbolic step of removing North Korea from its list of state sponsors of terrorism. As one component of the ongoing six-party talks to encourage North Korea to give up its nuclear program, the trade-off doesn’t seem so bad. But a lack of hard evidence doesn’t mean something isn’t true. Although the current chatter revolves around Kim Jong Il’s possible ties to a nascent Syrian nuclear program, one episode from 25 years ago reminds me of the very real dangers the North Korean regime poses to international stability.

A bright former student of mine had risen to become a high-ranking official in the Central Party's Department of Propaganda and Agitation. One day in October 1983, he invited me and two other professors to his home for dinner. He lived in a luxury apartment complex for officials of the Central Party with the rank of director or above, where he shared a unit with his son, himself a special reporter for the official North Korean news agency.

All of a sudden, as we were in the middle of dinner, our host's son ran into the room out of breath.

"Dad, we have a serious problem," he said. "Have you heard the news?"

Our hearts skipped a beat. What could possibly have transpired to put an experienced news reporter in such an agitated state?

"This just came in over the wire. They botched the job. It's a serious situation. The bald goon survived and his underlings died instead. Our news report is now worthless, and they sent all of us home."

Our host excused himself suddenly and rushed back to his office. The three of us left the apartment puzzled and concerned.

Within two days, news of a terrorist attack had spread far beyond my friend's apartment. At the time, we were told that a bombing in Burma had narrowly missed its target: the traveling South Korean president. In Pyongyang, nationwide rallies blamed an inside job by a rogue South Korean agent and, more broadly, the "American imperialists." Calls for the liberation of the South through revolutionary war were rampant. Only then could I guess at the reason for the commotion at my former student's place two nights before: His son had been informed of the operation ahead of the actual bombing in Burma and had written the news report in advance under the assumption that the operation would be a success. He assumed the South Korean president, as well as his entire entourage, would be dead. At his rank, our dinner host, my former student, not only would have known about the attack, he probably would have helped plan it.

In North Korea, there is a special unpublicized wing of the Communist Party called Bureau 3 that oversees all operations vis-à-vis the South. Another former student who works in Bureau 3 said that the director of a special team assigned to the Burma operation was dismissed suddenly. We later learned that he was demoted to party secretary at a small factory in the eastern coastal city of Sinpo for botching the secret mission of assassinating the South Korean president.

The Aung San terrorist bombing of Oct. 9, 1983, claimed the lives of 17 South Korean cabinet members, including Deputy Prime Minister Suh Suk Joon and Foreign Minister Lee Beom Suk. Fifteen more suffered major injuries. A year later, the Burmese government reported to the United Nations that the country had carried out the Aung San terrorist bombing and severed diplomatic relations with North Korea. I only learned those facts many years later, upon coming to Seoul. At the time, I was oblivious to the truth and was busy being summoned every day to rallies condemning the South Korean regime for the bombing.

Now, when I hear of tragic events on the peninsula, such as the incident in July in which a North Korean soldier shot and killed a 53-year-old tourist from the South, I think of the lies that the North must be telling its citizens. That is, if they hear anything at all.

THE ENEMY OF MY ENEMY

Thirty years have passed since I last saw Kim Jong Il. Upon leaving Pyongyang, I spent some 10 years in South Korea. And now I am living in the United States, the land of my so-called mortal enemy.

A world away, I think of Kim often. Any day, I imagine he will be taken out by the single bullet of an aggrieved underling. Who could blame such a person? He has driven his people to starve to death. He is the only person in the country who enjoys basic freedoms and human rights. He has managed to shut the eyes, ears, and mouths of the North Korean people.

And yet, I hope that he does not meet such a tragic end. At times I pray for him. More than anything, I am saddened by how he has changed since that day we met so long ago. Sometimes, I even feel guilty, for I could claim to be indebted to his family. Because of his father's immense zeal for education, I studied for free and became a university professor.

Today, I remain optimistic. News of the outside world has been silently seeping into North Korea. Day by day, the number of people leaving the country grows. More than 10,000 North Koreans have resettled in South Korea, and tens of thousands hide in China. Try as Kim might to intimidate his people with guns and knives, they are abandoning him more and more. But even if he refuses to open North Korea's heavy and sturdy doors, the currents of history have grown strong enough to break them open like floodgates.

If Kim Jong Il ever realizes that opening up North Korea is in his interest, I will return to Pyongyang the very next day. I want to devise the best education system in the world based on my observations and experiences in Seoul and the United States. But I am already more than 75 years old. I can feel myself growing weaker by the day. Before I grow so infirm that my experiences become useless, I would love to meet Kim Jong Il one last time and give him one last lesson. I, who became a university professor thanks to his father; I, who traveled to Russia, Seoul, and now Washington. I no longer loathe him. I pity him. Even though he killed my family, I have already forgiven him.

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