



North Korea's Schindler: meet the man who saved more than 3,000 defectors

As Oskar Schindler saved the lives of 1,200 Jews in the 1940s, this man has saved more than 3,000 North Korean defectors. Known as "Superman", his story, told here for the first time, shows the brutal reality behind the regime's Olympic smiles. Exclusive interview by author Sungju Lee, with Susan McClelland



Fortunate few: photographs of children who have escaped North Korea

The Times and The Sunday Times and carefully selected third parties use cookies on this site to improve performance, for analytics and for advertising. By browsing this site you are agreeing to this. For more information see our [Privacy and Cookie policy](#).

CLOSE

MENU

MONDAY JULY 16 2018

It was a crisp, clear afternoon in 2015 when I first met the man whom Médecins Sans Frontières workers called North Korea's Oskar Schindler. That morning, Youngja Kim at the Citizens' Alliance for North Korean Human Rights had whispered into the phone that I had to drop everything and head to a cafe outside the city. "The man is ready to meet you," she said. I could hear urgency in her voice, as if she needed to get this information out before the line got cut off. "The man knows what you look like. He will come to you and tap you on the shoulder."

"The man" was wanted by both the North Korean regime and China. Given the chance, North Korean spies would not hesitate to kill him. A decade ago, his children were threatened with kidnapping if he continued his work, and he has bribed himself out of Chinese prisons too many times to count. His crime? Selling state secrets? No. The man is a human smuggler. By some accounts, the South Korean businessman has rescued as many as 3,500 North Koreans — more than 10% of all defectors now living in South Korea. His work, including laying the trails out of China, can also be linked to the escape of many more. He uses the false name Stephen, but over time he simply became known in North Korean expat circles as Superman. "He is a superhero of sorts," says Jack Kim, an immigration lawyer and founder of and special adviser to HanVoice, a North Korean advocacy group based in Canada. "You get a lot of people and groups boasting that they smuggle North Korean defectors. These are small operations compared to what Superman has done, year after year. To some, he's mythical."

I escaped North Korea in 2002 when I was 15. I was the son of a high-ranking military officer, but my family was kicked out of Pyongyang in 1997, when I was 10. At 11, I found myself homeless after my parents went out in search of food and never returned. For more than three years, I lived on the street as a *kotjebi*, or street kid. I was rescued by my grandfather and, shortly after, reunited with my father, who had been looking for me all along. He helped me leave for South Korea.

MENU

MONDAY, JULY 16, 2018

Since then, I have spent my life as a refugee activist, but I have not forgotten the skills I picked up as a *kotjebi*. To survive, you need to learn how to read people. The moment I looked into Superman's tired eyes, I could tell he held many secrets and even more sorrows. He said he was 53, but he looked 40 and was handsome. Clean-shaven, he wore a sleek navy-blue blazer with matching cotton slacks.

How a North Korean soldier made it over the border

After we sat down together in a cafe, Superman explained in a low voice that he has learnt to melt into his surroundings. "I'm like an actor," he told me. "Sometimes I'm a peasant in a rural village in China. Sometimes I'm a self-absorbed businessman. Today, I'm a Seoul suburbanite. The difference between me and them," he said, pointing to a table of mums with babies sleeping in high-tech strollers, "is that if I miss a line or an entrance, someone goes to prison. Someone dies."



MENU

MONDAY 16 JULY 2018

This is the truth the North Korean regime doesn't want the rest of the world to see. It may have spent the past fortnight projecting an image of Olympic peace and reconciliation, but behind the smiles and regimented clapping, the reality is altogether darker. For would-be defectors, the options to escape Kim Jong-un's brutal regime are limited. The border between North and South Korea is heavily guarded and littered with land mines. Russia is not an option because a North Korean would stand out among the local population.

That leaves China. Despite international pressure, China still views North Koreans as illegal work migrants. Chinese authorities, police and military patrol the North Korean border and border towns. They hunt those defectors who survived the perilous crossing. They block their entrance to foreign consulates and embassies and torture them for information on other defectors and the Pyongyang regime. After interrogation, dissidents are deported back to North Korea where they face prison: a few months for crossing to China for food, several years in harsh labour camps for communicating with South Korean nationals. Many have been executed.

Superman's job for the past 20 years has been to keep defectors safe in China and get them out to Mongolia or, via Laos, Vietnam and Cambodia, to Thai refugee centres. From there, they can move on to Seoul where, under the South Korean constitution, they are viewed as citizens. Because of his work, Superman is considered an enemy of both the Chinese and North Korean states. "To China, Superman is seen as encouraging the refugee problem," explains Citizens' Alliance's Youngja Kim. "To Pyongyang, he's a direct threat. There are about 30,000 defectors in South Korea [many of whom have been helped by Superman]. They have ways to get messages back to family in North Korea and that information about western freedoms, laws and rights has changed minds about the regime. That information could start a revolution."

Back in 1994, the furthest thing from Superman's mind was saving other people, let alone becoming a political figure that

MENU

MONDAY, JULY 16, 2018

would land him on North Korea's most wanted list. He ran a successful textile company, buying raw materials in China and selling them in South Korea. He had a young family and his business frequently brought him to the Yanbian Korean Autonomous Prefecture. Part of China, Yanbian is home to a large proportion of what are known as "ethnic Koreans" — Chinese-Korean citizens whose families have lived in China since before 1948 when the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (North Korea) was formed. In Yanbian's main city, Yanji, Superman would step off the train and be met by North Korean *kotjebi*, street kids like I was, begging, starving and skeletal. Wild-eyed and with nothing to lose, they'd fawn over Superman in his rich silk suits and sleek patent leather shoes. "I'd give them some yuan to get rid of them," Superman says. "Back then, they were a nuisance, dirtying up the train stations."

At the time, there weren't enough North Korean refugees to be anything more than an annoyance. But that changed at the height of North Korea's decade-long famine in the 1990s, which saw tens of thousands of refugees cross the border. China began to crack down, with police and the military conducting raids on alleged safe houses and doing street sweeps to catch defectors. Superman didn't know any of this in 1996, when his business started to go belly-up after his main buyer declared bankruptcy. Viewing himself as a failure, he found himself contemplating suicide on a bridge in Seoul. He looked into the Han River, hoisted himself up on the railing to jump, when suddenly the faces of the *kotjebi* flashed across his mind. "I had this vision, like something reached out to show me a new course I had to take in life. The street kids were poorer than me but still had will to live," he says. "I was about to kill myself when I still had so much. I stepped down and vowed to rescue the *kotjebi* because that vision of them had saved my life."

Superman's young, beautiful wife, a devout Christian, supported his vision. They mortgaged their home in China and borrowed what they could to rent 10 safe houses — mostly rundown apartments in crowded city blocks — in Yanji, Dandong, Shenyang and Weihai. Superman moved his wife and two small children, then aged one and four, from Seoul to Dalian, China, to

MENU

MONDAY, JULY 16, 2018

keep them close. The homes filled up quickly; by the end of the year, more than 100 people lived in his houses.

“The first people tended to be men and *kotjebi* from northern North Korean cities and towns, where the famine had hit hardest,” Superman says. “Those who were strong enough to make it to China were still suffering from skin diseases, stomach ailments, coughs and malnutrition. If they went to hospital, they risked being sent back to North Korea. All they had was medicine that Médecins Sans Frontières would give me to give to them. Many of them died right there on the floor of our homes. They were stateless and without rights. Nobody cared whether they lived or died.”

The defectors who were well enough would sit up with Superman long into the nights, telling their stories. Beyond the North Korea capital, Pyongyang, where foreign journalists are forbidden to travel freely, there was little to no food, no jobs, no schools, no medical care. By the end of the century, many rural North Koreans were surviving by foraging in the woods for bugs, herbs and rodents to eat. Mothers became prostitutes, or what are called “nightflowers”, for a little cash to buy rice and tofu from the black markets that had become the North’s main source of food and supplies. North Koreans fled in droves across the Tumen and Yalu rivers, trading food, including puppies and fish, for rice and work in China. All had lost loved ones, many their entire families. Experts estimate that as many as 1m of North Korea’s 25m population died during the 1990s.

In China, Superman’s wife worked part-time at a doll factory while he managed to keep his business afloat to cover their costs. “Lots of times we found ourselves broke and my wife and I would scavenge through the garbage sites for vegetables that she would make into stews,” Superman says. “We sold our belongings, including our wedding rings. But the North Koreans couldn’t go out. That was the rule. We would support them.”

His only intention at first was to keep the defectors hidden and safe. That changed in the autumn of 1999 when a quiet, neatly dressed man turned up in one of Superman’s apartments in

Yanji. He was healthy and if his appearance wasn't enough to give him away, his accent did. He was from Pyongyang. He was among the elite; he was not escaping North Korea because he was hungry. The man eventually confided in Superman that he designed tunnels for the North Korean army to test nuclear weapons. The man was the first to broach the subject with Superman: "Get me out of China."

Superman had little time to think before Chinese police raided the man's apartment saying that they'd been tipped off — most likely by a North Korean spy — that the inhabitants were selling weapons and opium. Twelve soldiers broke into the unit, cornered the engineer and the five other men. The two youngest, former *kotjebi*, leapt out of the seventh-floor window. The other four were arrested. Superman bribed Chinese police with \$6,500, but only two of the men were freed. The other two, including the engineer, just disappeared. Superman heard years later that the engineer had been executed by firing squad at a North Korean prison.

The two *kotjebi* who had jumped out of the window found their way to Superman's Dalian home. They viewed their survival from the fall as a miracle. They told Superman that he, too, was alive for a reason. North Koreans weren't safe in China, they told him. "You're supposed to get us out." To get the North Koreans out of China, Superman's first priority was to make defectors look like ethnic Koreans — those resident in China. "North Koreans are thin and wear dark, plain, loose-fitting clothes," he explains. "Ethnic Koreans are bigger, rounder and wear colourful, tailored clothes. Chinese police boast that they can spot a defector just by their shoes. Defectors had to become like me, chameleons."

The first group Superman smuggled out of China consisted of four men, including the two *kotjebi* who had survived the jump. While Superman spoke some Chinese, he travelled on a South Korean passport and spoke with a South Korean accent, which would draw questions from police, so he hired an ethnic Korean translator, who would go on to become his right-hand man. The defectors needed new clothes, fattening up and then the final

step, an excuse as to why they could not speak, for if they did, their lack of Chinese and accents would give them away. Before departing Dalian, Superman stuffed cotton into one of the defector's mouths to mimic a gum wound. A neck brace was placed on another man. As for the two *kotjebi*, he ordered them to sleep the entire way on the buses, first to Beijing and then to Inner Mongolia. "Our plan was that the translator would say we were accompanying the men to a hospital for treatment," explains Superman.

In Inner Mongolia, the group holed up in a hostel that was part brothel, part meeting place for low-level drug dealers. But it was busy and loud and the group went unnoticed. While his translator walked to the border to scout for the best place for the defectors to cross, Superman met a former business colleague, whose son was a border guard in Mongolia. "I gave him three \$100 bills so that his son would be waiting on the other side. The Gobi Desert is vast and many defectors die wandering that place, with winter temperatures of -40C to summer extremes of 45C," Superman says. "Can you imagine, after everything they've been through, dying just before they're about to be free?"

At midnight, at the crossing, Superman gave each defector a sign to wear around their necks that read in Mongolian: "We're refugees, take us to the South Korean embassy in Ulan Bator."

"I watched, tears streaming down my face, as they climbed over the fence and disappeared," Superman says. "I hadn't slept for more than 45 minutes at any time after deciding to smuggle them out of China. I felt sadness that I might never see them again and joy that they had made it. These men had become my own family."

Kang Won-cheol, now a father and a bank employee in Seoul, was one of the *kotjebi* who escaped that night. "I knew the risks. I knew we could be shot or sent back to North Korea at any given moment," he says. "But I also felt safe."

MENU

MONDAY 16 JULY 2018

A few weeks later, Superman was back in the same Inner Mongolian city with another group of defectors. But this time, his cover had been blown. His translator was arrested by police while scouting the border. Then eight Chinese officers cornered Superman when he was alone. “My interrogators didn’t seem to care about catching the defectors,” he says. “They wanted to know who I worked for: the United Nations, the United States or South Korea? They wanted to make this an international incident, saying I was a spy for the West. I discovered then that working with refugees was political. The refugees were pawns, not people.”

For the next two months, Superman languished in an Inner Mongolian prison. His food was a small portion of bread each day. Outside the prison, his wife borrowed against their home, raising \$17,000, which the Chinese police eventually took to release him. During his incarceration, he lost 14kg. “When I was released, my wife didn’t recognise me,” he says. “I didn’t know the man I saw in the mirror. But I did know I couldn’t stop. When I watched Schindler’s List many years later, there was a scene near the end when he gets upset that he didn’t rescue more. I was like that. I kept thinking, if I make this turn, if I do things this way, I can save more lives.”

It was too dangerous for Superman to consider taking defectors through Inner Mongolia again. Back at his home in Dalian, he studied 18th- and 19th-century opium trafficking routes through China to Thailand. He then travelled alone by bus, car, foot and boat along the Mekong River to test his ideas. “The one thing I didn’t take into consideration was that the defectors had spent their lives in a cold climate. The mosquitoes on the Mekong and in the forests nearly killed them,” he says. “I had them walking, in one stretch, 25 miles a day in hot, humid temperatures that gave them rashes. I was so stupid. I thought of everything except their health.”

He collected medicines and had the defectors take a few days to get as healthy as they could before the exodus. But even with that, he still couldn’t guarantee there would be no risks. “This is one of the most dangerous journeys in the world,” he says.

“Some have fallen off the mountains. Others have drowned. Others have been caught and sent back to North Korea.”

On one of his early trips to Thailand, Superman was arrested for breaking immigration laws. The defectors were sent to South Korean resettlement centres, but he spent nine months behind bars. Unlike his stint in the Chinese prison, though, he was well fed and used the time to devise complicated networks to smuggle more North Koreans out of China. When he was released he had “defectors on buses or mini vans heading south to the Golden Triangle; they’re also leaving on boats and crossing by foot over mountains and through forests,” he says.

“I’ve lost people along the way — just died right in front of me. But my network won’t stop until China recognises North Koreans as refugees instead of criminals. Whatever happens in the coming weeks, months and years, the international community needs to put pressure on China to acknowledge that North Koreans are vulnerable refugees needing protection under international law.”

Over the past decade, the smuggling of North Koreans has become big business. Many smugglers now mimic Superman’s techniques and use his trade routes. They charge a minimum of \$1,700 per person for hotels, translators, guides, transportation and bribes, and add \$1,500 or more for their own profit. As a

MENU

MONDAY JULY 16 2018

result, over the past decade most defectors have come from the larger cities, including Pyongyang, and have well-off family members already settled in South Korea. Superman refuses to work this way and doesn't charge fees. Instead, he relies on donations from charities including Citizens' Alliance to cover basic costs. Working in this way has enabled Superman to help the most vulnerable and poorest North Koreans stuck inside China: namely, the women.

China's three-decade-long one-child policy has resulted in many families abandoning their daughters. Officially, China claims that its male to female ratio today is about equal, but unofficially there is an imbalance. Chinese men have difficulty finding brides, particularly in remote areas. North Korean women have filled this demand. Many are recruited in their North Korean cities and villages by other women, sometimes even relatives, and agree to be sold to Chinese men as wives, believing that they will have better lives and be able to support their families back home. What the women don't know until it's too late is that their marriages are illegal. The women are nothing more than concubines. They have no legal rights. Children born from these marriages are not considered Chinese citizens and have no access to medical care or schooling. The women's Chinese husbands force them to abort foetuses. Knowing their lives are at risk if they remain in China, many women are desperate to escape to Thailand and then South Korea. When they do, though, the journeys are often too perilous for the children to come. They get left behind with a promise that one day the mother will return and take them to a better life.

"About 75% of the North Koreans in South Korea today are women," says Michael Glendinning of the UK-based advocacy group European Alliance for Human Rights in North Korea. "Of these, a majority have experienced gender-based violence, including rape, sex trafficking and forced marriages."

Jihyun Park, a Manchester mother and North Korean activist, was in an abusive relationship with a Chinese man for more than six years before she managed to escape. "When I went to

MENU

MONDAY, JULY 16, 2018

China in 1998, I was told that if I didn't marry the Chinese man, I couldn't stay," she says. "We ladies agree because life in North Korea is so unbearable. We gamble, hoping these marriages will be the lesser of two evils.

The North Korean woman becomes for the man his agricultural worker, domestic worker and sex toy, always threatened that if she doesn't comply, he will report her to the police and have her deported." In the early years, Superman smuggled out very few women, as most were hidden away. But over the years, he began to work with the churches to find out where the women were and how to rescue them. A 17-year-old girl, who had been a sex slave to a Chinese police officer since she was 14, died after giving herself an abortion in one of Superman's flats. Another young North Korean woman was abducted right in front of him. He was helpless to intervene, knowing that if he did, he risked the safety of the others he had hidden away. Superman's Chinese business partners, not knowing about his double life, have even offered him North Korean teenagers as gifts. "North Korean women are dehumanised," he says. "They are treated worse than cattle in China."

In 2006, with his family continually being threatened and his daughter approaching her teenage years, Superman made the painful decision to get his family out of China to safety in the US. Today he rarely sees them, but he feels that's for the best.

A year ago, his close colleague, Han Chung-Ryeol, an ethnic Korean who ran a church that provided sanctuary for defectors, was murdered in the woods near his home. A woman, claiming to be a defector, lured the pastor to a secluded place where he was stabbed and beheaded. "His death was intended to send a message to those of us helping defectors," Superman says. "Pyongyang for some reason is nervous."

In our most recent interview, Superman explains why it is time to disclose his endeavours. "I want my story to be known now, because my story is the story of North Korean defectors. No one seems to be hearing the voices of those most affected by international sanctions and North Korea's policies of pursuing

MENU

MONDAY 23 JULY 2018

militarisation over the wellbeing of its people. Right now, we have the North Koreans exploiting the Winter Olympics, presenting themselves as a peaceful regime. But there are two North Korean families with children under arrest right now in China. While we're celebrating the Olympic games, these families face repatriation and prison. I hope that the international community puts pressure on China to stop this deportation. I hope we start recognising North Koreans as refugees in need of our support. Maybe if I can shout loud enough, the world will start to listen."

Susan and Sungju are co-authors of Every Falling Star, which chronicles Sungju's life as a former street kid in North Korea

North Korea



Share

Save



What you need to know about the smart meter rollout

SPONSORED



A tale of 3 generations: how attitudes to data change

SPONSORED

Comments are subject to our community guidelines, which can be viewed [here](#).

2 comments

Newest | Oldest | Most Recommended

John D Finlay Feb 26, 2018

Well done ST for blocking out the picture of the NK Oskar Schindler in the magazine.....pity you printed his full face picture at the bottom of page 17 of the News section of the main paper. Hope you will feel responsible for any harm that may come to him as a result.

Recommend Reply

MENU

MONDAY JULY 16 2018

The Vincentis Feb 26, 2018

A Super man indeed!

Recommend Reply

MadDog Feb 26, 2018

I suspect Pyongyang is nervous because unrest in the population is stirring. The Kim family has held on longer than many but there is something in the waters, one can feel it just below the surface.

3 Recommend Reply



You are logged in as a registered user

Ready for more?

Ready for more? Subscribe for just £1 a month for 3 months.

FIND OUT MORE

▲ BACK TO TOP

GET IN TOUCH

Contact us

Help

MENU

[The Times Editorial Complaints](#)
MONDAY JULY 16 2018

[The Sunday Times Editorial Complaints](#)

[Place an announcement](#)

[Classified advertising](#)

[Display advertising](#)

[The Times corrections](#)

[The Sunday Times corrections](#)

MORE FROM THE TIMES AND THE SUNDAY TIMES

[The Times e-paper](#)

[The Sunday Times e-paper](#)

[Times Currency Services](#)

[The Sunday Times Wine Club](#)

[The Times Dating](#)

[Times Print Gallery](#)

[Times Crossword Club](#)

[Sunday Times Driving](#)

[Times+](#)

[The Sunday Times Rich List](#)

[Insider City Guides](#)

[Good University Guide](#)

[Schools Guide](#)

[The Brief](#)

[Best Places to Live](#)

[Best Places to Stay](#)

[Announcements](#)

[Times Appointments](#)

© Times Newspapers Limited 2018.

Registered in England No. 894646.

Registered office: 1 London Bridge Street, SE1 9GF.

[Privacy & cookie policy](#)

[Licensing](#)

[Sitemap](#)

[Topics](#)

[Commissioning Terms](#)

[Terms and conditions](#)