

Son crusades to meet father hijacked to North Korea

BY LEE SUNG-EUN

When Hwang In-cheol was 2 years old, his father disappeared.

“Maybe he’ll come back on Christmas Day,” Hwang’s mother said.

Hwang counted down the days, imagining his father coming through the door laden down with presents.

It didn’t happen.

“Maybe next Christmas,” his mother said.

It wasn’t until Hwang was in the third grade that his father’s brother decided he should know the truth.

Hwang Won was a 32-year-old producer for Munhwa Broadcasting Corporation (MBC) based in Gangwon. On Dec. 11, 1969, he boarded a Korean Air flight from Gangneung, Gangwon, for Gimpo International Airport in Seoul to attend an MBC internal meeting. A senior colleague who was supposed to attend was busy. He ordered Hwang to fill in for him.

Ten minutes after takeoff, a North Korean spy hijacked the YS-11 aircraft and the 50 other people on it, all South Koreans, to Wonsan, some 207 kilometers (128.6 miles) east of Pyongyang, the North’s capital.

The producer left behind his wife, a 3-month-old daughter and 2-year-old Hwang In-cheol.

It was the second — and last — instance of a South Korean aircraft being hijacked by the North. On Feb. 16, 1958, a Korean Air flight from Busan to Seoul was abducted midway with 34 people on board, including a few foreigners.

On March 8, 26 were returned to the South. Local authorities believe the eight people who remained were all hijackers.

Eleven years later, the local media went to town on the hijack story, pleading with Pyongyang to safely return the victims. Third parties were suggested as negotiators, including the United Nations Command, the United States, Britain and the International Committee of the Red Cross.

On Feb. 4, 1970, North Korea announced it would repatriate all the South Koreans. But on Feb. 14, only 39 passengers walked across the Bridge of No Return (or Freedom Bridge, as South Korea calls it) in the truce village of Panmunjom.

Eleven people, including Hwang’s father and all four crew members, were held in North Korea.

Pyongyang never explained why.

“My uncle came up to me one day when I was in third grade and said I should know,” says Hwang In-cheol, now 48. “I was so young, but I knew. I knew I could never see him again because he was trapped in North Korea — a land far, far away, some place I could never reach.”

In a three-part series published by the JoongAng Ilbo after the passengers’ return, survivors vividly described how they were brainwashed every day for over



PARK SANG-MOON

Hwang In-cheol was 2 years old when his father Hwang Won, a producer for Munhwa Broadcasting Corporation, boarded a plane that was hijacked by a North Korean agent in 1969. Hwang is campaigning to bring him home.

two months about communist doctrine and the glories of North Korean founder Kim Il Sung, the grandfather of current leader Kim Jong-un.

Any show of defiance was met with cor-

poral punishment. Kim Jin-kyu, 40, was punched in the face so viciously that his front teeth were loosened.

Jang Young-gil, 24, was locked in a room that fell to -8 to -7 degrees Celsius (17.6 to

19.4 degrees Fahrenheit) at night. According to the JoongAng Ilbo report, it was retribution for being “disobedient.”

Hwang’s father was mentioned in the series. North Korean military guards “loathed” him because he would always “quibble over the theology” of communism, according to an account. One time, a guard reportedly yelled at him: “Bastard! I’m going to make a skeleton out of you and bury it in the southern mountains.”

The series did not say why the 11 people were held back by North Korea. Hwang says he heard from passengers who returned that his father was caught singing a South Korean song one day that expressed

longing for home. A guard dragged him out into the darkness.

Hwang Won was never seen again.

Growing up without a father in Korea in the 1970s and 1980s was stigmatizing for kids whose fathers died or whose parents divorced. It was even harder for Hwang and his younger sister. Classmates and teachers couldn’t relate to their situation at all.

“People who have gone through pain tend to be locked up in their own world,” says Hwang. “I wasn’t necessarily an outcast, but neither did I have anyone with whom I could share my deep emotions.”

Hwang’s grades were poor because he was never motivated. He didn’t dream of a better life.

“My uncles pitied me, doubting I could make a man out of myself,” he says. “They were probably doing so out of genuine love, but it didn’t have a positive impact on me. Before even trying, I usually threw in the towel.”

The biggest problem for Hwang, however, was his mother, who never got over the trauma of losing her husband at the age of 31, just three years after being wed.

Today she would probably be diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder, he says. She didn’t allow her children to play outside, worrying they would somehow vanish like their father.

“My sister and I were mentally abused by her,” Hwang says, “because she would always channel her anxieties to us.”

All his life, normalcy was all that Hwang yearned for. He wanted to be like the people he saw around him, to move on with his life. But the tragedy of his father’s disappearance kept the entire family tethered to the past.

At 22, Hwang met a woman he wanted to marry. His mother wasn’t accepting. Hwang had to convince her he wasn’t leaving her for good. Being the only man in the family meant she relied on him in ways he can’t fathom even to this day.

“I wasn’t her father. I wasn’t her husband and I sure didn’t feel like her son,” he says. “She just had this weird obsession with me and my sister. I was never free from her.”

Hwang’s mother, now 78, lives in a hos-

pital for the elderly, unable to walk and barely able to speak. She never remarried.

In 1970, the families of the missing passengers and crew formed a lobbying committee and demanded local authorities get their loved ones back. Nothing changed, and the group gradually lost its passion. The committee was disbanded in 1979 when its president died.

“Some got remarried, some went abroad,” Hwang says. “Some were just too old. Then they started to doubt the point of constantly reminding themselves of the tragedy.”

In the end, he says, “Most — if not all — just gave up.”

On Feb. 26, 2001, a reunion for families separated by the 1950-53 Korean War was held in Pyongyang, and a flight attendant on the hijacked plane met her mother from the South. It was the first glimpse of the fate of any of the 11 people who didn't come back.

The attendant told her mother that she lived near another flight attendant from the ill-fated flight. She didn't know much about the other passengers such as Hwang's father, she said, but heard they were doing well.

That same year, Hwang's first-born daughter turned 2, the age at which he lost his father. Hwang looked into her eyes and imagined the devastation his father must have felt after being torn from his family. He calls it an “awakening moment.” He was 34.

He wanted to do something to find his father. But he knew there were thousands of families like him yearning to reunite with loved ones trapped in the North. Society wouldn't care about a story decades old. The media wouldn't listen.

In June 2010, Hwang registered his father as an abductee with the UN Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances, the first relative of one of the hijacked people to do so. The Dong-A Ilbo interviewed him. More interview requests poured in.

Hwang started a one-man campaign. He collected accounts of what happened to his father after the plane took off. He staged solo rallies across from the National Assembly, read emotionally charged statements to news cameras and shared his story with human rights groups.

He wrote letters to his father and begged the Ministry of Unification to send them to the North on his behalf.

The most senior government official Hwang has been able to meet was the vice minister of unification in November 2010.

“The vice minister told me that improving inter-Korean relations was the top priority at that time,” says Hwang.

But the real government response came after the meeting, he says, when a deputy director of the ministry pulled him into a room.

“He said, ‘We can't,’” Hwang recalls. “As if to decipher what his boss was trying to say earlier, the deputy director bluntly stated that the government couldn't solve the issue for me because it was too closely related to South-North Korean relations.”

Hwang had slightly more luck with non-governmental organizations.

The International Committee of the Red Cross got an official response from Pyongyang on the fate of the passengers left behind.

Pyongyang claimed they had chosen to become North Korean citizens of their “free will,” and that it was impossible to confirm whether any individual was still alive or not.

The regime made a similar claim to the UN Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances, asserting that the passengers and crew were “not a case of enforced disappearance” and therefore weren't a humanitarian issue.

“The government isn't doing the one important thing they should be doing,” Hwang says. “A country is meant to protect its citizens' lives and property. They weren't just 11 people. They were 11 South Korean nationals.”

“This is neglect.”



TEACH NORTH KOREAN REFUGEES

Members of Teach North Korean Refugees, a nonprofit that matches North Korean defectors with volunteer English tutors, rally in Insa-dong, central Seoul, last month to raise awareness of Hwang's campaign.



JOONGANG ILBO

The front page of the JoongAng Ilbo on Dec. 12, 1969, the day after a South Korean plane was hijacked and forced to land in Wonsan, east of the North Korean capital of Pyongyang.

In a telephone interview, a source from the Ministry of Unification flatly rejected Hwang's statement, asserting that he and the government are on good terms and “cooperating well” with each other.

“We have consistently brought up the issue during bilateral talks between North Korea and issued several statements on the matter,” the source said, requesting anonymity.

During inter-Korean Red Cross talks last year, Seoul requested Pyongyang verify whether 50 abductees were alive or dead, and the North followed up with data on “many of them,” the source continued. According to the Ministry of Unification, 3,835 South Koreans have been abducted by the North in the past six decades, 516 of whom never returned.

“We have limits dealing with the issue because the abductees are now living in the North. We have to protect them,” he continued. “Their lives and their family's lives can be at risk if other North Koreans realize they have links with the South and start pointing

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fingers at them.”

The biggest breakthrough for Hwang came in 2013. A source in South Korea confirmed that his father was alive and living close to Pyongyang.

His joy was impossible to describe, Hwang says. And the news prompted many

ideas.

But Hwang refuses to discuss them out of fear that his father might get into “danger” for having any links with a South Korean — even his own son.

“I want to protect him,” says Hwang. “The man is really old now.”

Hwang didn't go to college. He worked at a publishing company for seven years, but eventually quit his job to spend more time searching for his father.

He supports his wife and three daughters by getting up before dawn and dropping by a local employment agency to choose the best paying job for the day. He works “every day including Christmas,” usually from 7 a.m. to 5 p.m. One day Hwang may work as a courier, the next day he may be hauling boxes at a traditional market.

The flexibility he has with jobs allowed him to lavish time and attention on his daughters — the attention he was robbed of growing up.

“I bathed them with my own hands until they entered the fourth grade,” he says. “As a father, it was crucial that I built that physical connection with them before they grew too old and wanted to keep a distance from me.”

The work flexibility also allows Hwang plenty of time to search for his father.

In March, Hwang was invited to a workshop of international volunteers at the National Assembly. He met Casey Lartigue, an American who co-founded Teach North Korean Refugees, a nonprofit that matches North Korean defectors with volunteer English tutors.

Moved by Hwang's story, Lartigue volunteered to help. His group assembled a “Bring My Father Back” team that has publicized Hwang's plight in numerous countries. An online petition was launched on Change.org (www.change.org/p/please-help-bring-my-father-home-bringmyfatherhome), which has some 200 supporters.

Never before has Hwang been offered help by foreigners. Never has he taken time to learn English.

“The moment I heard from Mr. Hwang directly,” says Lartigue, “I had a feeling of regret that I had not paid attention to this case or others like it.”

“It is easy to forget after reporters have moved on that the people in yesterday's headlines are still suffering pain,” Lartigue says. “I have read about many of the conflicts between the Koreans, but somehow this is one that I never read about.”

The ultimate mission of Teach North Korean Refugees is to help Hwang contact his father and meet him.

Madeline Hairfield, a 22-year-old American who has been tutoring Hwang since April, confesses feeling “absolutely shocked” after hearing his life story.

Hairfield is helping Hwang perfect a speech to deliver in August at functions in Peru and Argentina hosted by the International Coalition to Stop Crimes Against Humanity in North Korea, which is supported by over 40 worldwide organizations.

When asked what difference the foreigners have made in his long, winding journey, Hwang answers without hesitation: “I don't feel lonely anymore.”

On his way to work every morning and returning home every night, Hwang now studies English phonetics. His tutors have personally recorded the speech he's about to give on his smartphone, which enables him to practice the sounds in his spare time.

Hwang believes that a presentation given in English, not through an interpreter, will get his message across more strongly.

It's not a complicated message. Hwang wants to see his father.

“I just want to go to a communal bath with him, embrace him, take him out for a walk and smell his scent. He'll probably have that old person smell by now, but it won't matter,” Hwang says. “I just want to feel his existence.”

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