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## **(In)visibility of Trauma: Investigating the Influence of Trauma on North Korean Defector Memoir Construction**

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## **(In)visibility of Trauma**

*Investigating the Influence of Trauma on North Korean Defector Memoir Construction*

Master thesis

MA History, Arts and Culture of Asia, Faculty of Humanities, University of Leiden

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## Introduction

*“Consciously and unconsciously, as their traumatized psyches require, the memoirists scramble the more gruesome and/or shameful facts of their stories. That they do so is not symptomatic of dishonesty but, ironically, of the gravity of the memories they are struggling to articulate.”<sup>1</sup>*

In the past decade, survival stories of North Korean defectors have become a global phenomenon through TED talks and defector memoirs. However, this growing popularity was shortly followed by criticism, as their stories were often judged to be either ‘too rehearsed’ or ‘too inconsistent’.

With North Korea being closed off, defector testimonies have played an important role in providing information. A noteworthy example is the 2014 report by the United Nations Human Rights Council’s Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (UNHCR COI) for which well-known defector Dong-hyuk Shin testified.<sup>2</sup> The other is the yearly White Paper on Human Rights in North Korea, published since 1996 by the South Korean Korea Institute for National Unification (KINU).<sup>3</sup>

I aim to make an addition to the current debate regarding the interpretation of North Korean defector memoirs by answering the question: “What understanding can trauma theory provide us concerning North Korean defector memoirs?” In doing so, I hope to present *trauma theory* as an alternative way of interpreting North Korean defector memoirs.

Trauma theory became a well-researched interdisciplinary field in the 1990s, and has mainly been applied to the testimonies and memoirs of Holocaust survivors. At its core, trauma theory asserts the difference between traumatic memory compared to ‘regular’ memory, and introduces the concept ‘act of bearing witness’, both of which influence memoir construction. More specifically, “Trauma theory has been invaluable in explaining the testimonial arts, which represent the experience of suffering violence while driving the survivor to narrate, to testify, or to communicate.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> John Cussen, “On the Call to Dismiss North Korean Defectors’ Memoirs and on Their Dark American Alternative,” *Korean Studies* 40 (2016): 146, <https://doi.org/10.1353/ks.2016.0005>.

<sup>2</sup> Ji-young Song, “Why Some N. Korean Defectors’ Stories Fall Apart,” *NK News*, September 4, 2015, <https://www.nknews.org/2015/09/why-some-n-korean-defectors-stories-fall-apart/>.

<sup>3</sup> Gyeong-seob Oh et al., *White Paper on Human Rights in North Korea 2021* (Seoul: KINU, 2021), 14, <https://www.kinu.or.kr/pyxis-api/1/digital-files/57767ac0-6fea-4389-bbcf-fbe05fde4e71>.

<sup>4</sup> Marian Eide, *Terrible Beauty: The Violent Aesthetic and Twentieth-Century Literature*, Cultural Frames, Framing Culture (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2019), 16, Project MUSE.

According to Aleida Assmann, who is considered one of the main authorities regarding cultural and collective memory, the Holocaust plays an important role in the changing relationship between history and memory, and consequently testimony and memoir writing.<sup>5</sup> For this reason, and the importance of the Holocaust in connection to trauma theory, I believe that Holocaust memoirs form a compelling case study to compare to North Korean defector memoirs, if done with caution.

Due to the limited size of my thesis and to protect the quality of this study, there are some limitations: This study will solely focus on the effects of psychological trauma, as opposed to physical trauma. When discussing North Korean defectors, the focus will be on those who defected to South Korea. Due to my limited background in Korean, this study will only include English defector memoirs. And finally, the number of North Korean defector memoir case studies will be limited to four, as further detailed below.

#### Case study source material and research data

To decide which case studies to use, I have constructed Appendix A, which displays a full overview of English defector memoirs. I have included memoirs that were first published within the timeframe of 2012 until 2016, when the popularity of North Korean defector memoirs had increased. In my selection, I aimed to include one memoir by a male defector for comparison and diversity.

The English versions of the four case studies I have chosen were all published in 2015: Eunsun Kim's *A Thousand Miles to Freedom*, Yeonmi Park's *In Order to Live*, Hyeonsoo Lee's *The Girl with Seven Names*, and Joseph Kim's *Under the Same Sky*. These will be discussed in alphabetical order of the book titles. The defector's names are presented in order of first name followed by last name. They will be referred to by either using their full name or first name only, as Eunsun and Joseph both have Kim as a last name.

To study the relation between the passage of time and memory, Appendix B will specifically focus on the element of *time* regarding the experiences of the four defectors. The first table displays *life events*, the year in which these events happened and the defector's age. The second table will focus on the *time spent* in a certain place. The final table will display the *time difference* between the defector's escape from North Korea and the memoir's publication date.

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<sup>5</sup> Aleida Assmann, "History, Memory, and the Genre of Testimony," *Poetics Today* 27, no. 2 (Summer 2006): 261-73, <https://doi.org/10.1215/03335372-2005-003>.

## Structure

The main body of this thesis is divided into five chapters. The first chapter, *Trauma theory*, will provide a short historiography, followed by a summary of trauma theory. This chapter establishes the theoretical framework for this thesis while answering the question: “How does trauma influence memory?”

The second chapter, *Comparing Holocaust survivors and North Korean defectors*, will discuss Holocaust survivor memoirs in the first part, and North Korean defector memoirs in the second. It examines the specific role that Holocaust memoirs seem to play as a genre and compares Holocaust memoirs to defector memoirs.

From the third chapter, *Four case studies of North Korean defector memoirs*, the focus will shift to discussing the four case studies. General background information and elements of influence regarding the creation of the four memoirs will be determined in the first part. The second part will demonstrate the influence of these elements for each case study.

The fourth chapter, *Common story elements*, will discuss common and uncommon story elements for each case study in the first part, and draw conclusions regarding common story elements in the second part.

The fifth chapter, *Traumatic story elements*, will determine how trauma is included or excluded from the four case studies and answer the question: “How is trauma visible in North Korean defector memoirs?” The chapter’s research revolves around six traumatic story elements with examples provided to (dis)prove their relevancy.

I will end my thesis by providing a summary regarding my findings and conclude what understanding trauma theory can provide us with regarding North Korean defector memoirs. I will also specify my insight and recommendations regarding future research.

## List of abbreviations

KINU	Korea Institute for National Unification
LiNK	Liberty in North Korea (NGO)
NGO	Non-governmental organization
NIS	National Intelligence Service
PTSD	Post-traumatic stress disorder
TD	Time Difference (between Year of Publication and Year of Escape)
UNHCR COI	United Nations Human Rights Council's Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea
YoE	Year of Escape (from North Korea)
YoP	Year of Publication (first publication)

## Chapter 1: Trauma theory

The purpose of this chapter is to provide a theoretical framework that can be used as a reference for the following chapters. The first part of the chapter will summarize the historiography of trauma theory and introduce three of the main key players within trauma theory. The second part will discuss trauma theory itself and the relevancy to my research.

### 1.1 Historiography

The earliest origins of psychological trauma studies can be found in Sigmund Freud's study on psychoanalysis, regarding the connection between trauma and female hysteria, at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>6</sup>

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, World War I (1914-1919) and World War II (1939-1945) were the main reasons for interest and research into the subject of trauma. However, trauma did not exist outside of the concept of war and terms used to describe certain traumas, such as shell shock, were only used in reference to veterans.<sup>7</sup> In the aftermath of the Vietnam War (1955-1975) "a campaign by Vietnam veterans influenced the American Psychiatric Association to accept the condition of war trauma under the diagnosis of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD)."<sup>8</sup>

Trauma theory finally became a well-researched discipline in the 1990s, focussing on the cultural side of trauma, with the help of key players Cathy Caruth, professor of English and Comparative Literature, Shoshana Felman, professor of French and Comparative Literature, and Dori Laub, Holocaust survivor, psychoanalyst and psychiatrist.<sup>9</sup>

Caruth's core works are *Trauma* (1995), an edited volume of studies showing the applicability of trauma theory to different disciplines, and *Unclaimed Experience* (1996), discussing the close relation between history and trauma.<sup>10</sup>

Felman and Laub are co-authors for *Testimony* (1992), in which they discuss the connection between literature and trauma while focussing on the Holocaust, as well as explain the concept of 'witnessing' and the role of the listener, which will be explained in chapter 1.2.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Sarah Wood Anderson, "Readings of Trauma and Madness in Hemingway, H.D., and Fitzgerald" (PhD diss., University of North Carolina, 2010), 1, ProQuest Dissertations Publishing.

<sup>7</sup> Cathy Caruth, "Introduction," in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, ed. Cathy Caruth (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 3.

<sup>8</sup> Anderson, "Readings of Trauma," 7.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996).

<sup>11</sup> Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History* (New York, Routledge, 1992).



## 1.2 Trauma theory

The online Cambridge dictionary describes trauma as: “(a) severe emotional shock and pain caused by an extremely upsetting experience ...”<sup>12</sup> Trauma can refer to physical as well as psychological trauma, which can have an impact on memory.

According to Ernst van Alphen, a common misconception is that psychological trauma is a response to an overwhelming event. However: “An event or situation can become traumatic for someone when this person’s symbolic order does not provide consistent frames of reference in terms of which that event or situation can be experienced.”<sup>13</sup> The symbolic order, simplified as a person’s language and knowledge, is unable to provide a framework in which to place the experienced event. Psychological trauma is therefore caused by a lack of framework.<sup>14</sup>

Psychological trauma can influence memory in different ways. For one, psychological trauma can cause the specific traumatic memory to become repressed. However, in the case of Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) the sufferer is forced to relive the trauma through involuntary flashbacks.<sup>15</sup> What is considered as PTSD has changed over the years. Back in the early 90s, the experience of rape or sexual assault was not considered to be PTSD inducing.<sup>16</sup> As a result, as definitions of PTSD change, so does our perspective on survivors.

In some cases, the survivor can remember their trauma in great detail. Laub for example had very detailed memories about his childhood concerning the Holocaust and describes that these memories have a different intensity compared to others.<sup>17</sup>

Trauma theory incorporates the idea of the seemingly contrasting, repressed and detailed traumatic memory. According to trauma theory, a traumatic memory is stored differently compared to a ‘regular’ memory, making it difficult for the traumatic memory to reintegrate into regular memory. Trauma can therefore exist both outside of regular memory and in great detail.<sup>18</sup> According to Caruth, there is a latency to trauma, which causes the experience to not be readily available for the survivor to recollect. Instead, the survivor will first experience the event at a later time through involuntary remembrance, as opposed to during the event.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> “Trauma,” Cambridge Dictionary, accessed December 1, 2021, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/trauma>.

<sup>13</sup> Ernst van Alphen, “Second-Generation Testimony, Transmission of Trauma, and Postmemory,” *Poetics Today* 27, no. 2 (Summer 2006): 482, <https://doi.org/10.1215/03335372-2005-015>.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Caruth, “Introduction,” 3.

<sup>16</sup> Laura S. Brown, “Not Outside the Range: One Feminist Perspective on Psychic Trauma,” in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, ed. Cathy Caruth (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 111.

<sup>17</sup> Dori Laub, “Truth and Testimony: The Process and the Struggle,” in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, ed. Cathy Caruth (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 62.

<sup>18</sup> Anne Rothe, *Popular Trauma Culture: Selling the Pain of Others in the Mass Media* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2011), 147.

<sup>19</sup> Caruth, “Introduction,” 10.

Trauma theory emphasizes the importance of the ‘act of bearing witness’, which is the act of sharing one’s traumatic experience with another. According to Laub, giving testimony is necessary for a (trauma) survivor, as this is “... the process by which the narrator (the survivor) reclaims his position as a witness...”<sup>20</sup> Laub argues that there are three levels to the act of bearing witness: witnessing the self, witnessing the other and witnessing the process.<sup>21</sup>

It is argued that retelling and sharing a story with a listener, can help traumatic memories come to exist within regular memory. In this case, it is important for the listener to be committed to their role as listener, in order for the survivor to feel heard. The processes of being interviewed by an interviewer or writing a memoir are also argued to be helpful in integrating traumatic experiences into regular memory.<sup>22</sup>

An interesting debate within trauma theory is the possibility of ‘transference’ of trauma, and is supported by Caruth, Felman and Laub. General transference of trauma is demonstrated by Felman, who noticed while watching Holocaust interviews with her students, that they seemed traumatized afterwards. Felman argues that by witnessing such traumas, one could experience similar symptoms to that of the survivor.<sup>23</sup> This raises an interesting question for future research: Have co-authors, or perhaps even readers, of North Korean defector memoirs experienced such symptoms?

The transference of trauma between generations specifically has been studied since the 1980s.<sup>24</sup> Particularly regarding the second generation of Holocaust survivors there is the question if and how much of the parents’ trauma could be transferred to their children.<sup>25</sup> We could argue this debate also fits the North Korean defector case, with their children, the second generation, suffering from their parents’ status as second-class citizens.<sup>26</sup>

Considering the limited scope of my thesis I am unable to further discuss the debate regarding the transference of trauma, but it does raise interesting points about the North Korean defector case for future research.

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<sup>20</sup> Laub, “Truth and Testimony,” 70.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.

<sup>22</sup> Dori Laub, “Bearing Witness, or the Vicissitudes of Teaching,” in *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History*, ed. Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub (New York: Routledge, 1992), 57-74.

<sup>23</sup> Amy Hungerford, “Memorizing Memory,” *The Yale Journal of Criticism* 14, no. 1 (Spring 2001): 73, <https://doi.org/10.1353/yale.2001.0009>.

<sup>24</sup> Henry Greenspan et al., “Engaging Survivors: Assessing ‘Testimony’ and ‘Trauma’ as Foundational Concepts,” *Dapim: Studies on the Holocaust* 28, no. 3 (2014): 222, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23256249.2014.951909>.

<sup>25</sup> Wulf Kansteiner, “Testing the Limits of Trauma: The Long-term Psychological Effects of the Holocaust on Individuals and Collectives,” *History of the Human Sciences* 17, no. 2-3 (2004): 107, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0952695104047299>.

<sup>26</sup> Daniel Tudor, *Ask a North Korean: Defectors Talk about Their Lives inside the World's Most Secretive Nation* (Tokyo: Tuttle Publishing, 2017), 182-83.

## Chapter 2: Comparing Holocaust survivors and North Korean defectors

The first part of the chapter will focus on the history and importance of Holocaust survivor memoirs, which have played an important role in the establishment of memoirs as a genre and the popularity of trauma culture and misery memoirs. The second part of the chapter will go on to discuss the history and impact of North Korean defector memoirs and compare these findings to the Holocaust survivor memoirs. Research regarding the mental state of Holocaust survivors and North Korean defectors will be discussed at the end of each respective chapter.

### 2.1 Holocaust survivor memoirs

In the years following the Second World War (1939-1945), a large part of the Holocaust survivors in the Displaced Persons Camps left their home country to immigrate elsewhere, with Israel and the United States as the most sought after destinations.<sup>27</sup> The fact that this move seemed very final, implying that they would not return to their home country, made this process considerably difficult and stressful.<sup>28</sup> I would argue that this part of their experience is, to an extent, comparable to that of the North Korean defectors, as will be discussed in chapter 2.2.

Testimonies regarding the Second World War in general and the concentration camps specifically were provided by survivors and gathered as early as the end of the war.<sup>29</sup> Holocaust survivors were interviewed to collect evidence against the Nazi's. Their testimonies were considered inferior compared to other types of evidence, such as documentation. As there was little to no interest in the survivors' individual experiences, the number of testimonies started to decrease over time.<sup>30</sup>

The first memoirs of Holocaust survivors were published a few years after the war, with examples of memoirs by female Holocaust survivors published as early as 1947 and 1948 respectively. Comparable to the lack of interest regarding Holocaust testimonies in general, there was not much of an interest in memoirs, particularly those of female survivors.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Sharon Kangisser Cohen, "Choosing a Heim: Survivors of the Holocaust and Post-War Immigration," *European Judaism* 46, no. 2 (September 2013): 33, <https://doi.org/10.3167/ej.2013.46.02.04>.

<sup>28</sup> Dan Bar-On, "Transgenerational Aftereffects of the Holocaust in Israel: Three Generations," in *Breaking Crystal: Writing and Memory after Auschwitz*, ed. Efraim Sicher (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998), 105-6.

<sup>29</sup> Piotr Kuhlczak, "Mediating Trauma: How Do We Read the Holocaust Memoirs?" in *Tradition, Translation, Trauma: The Classic and the Modern*, ed. Jan Parker and Timothy Mathews (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 287.

<sup>30</sup> Tony Kushner, "Holocaust Testimony, Ethics, and the Problem of Representation," *Poetics Today* 27, no. 2 (Summer 2006): 276-77, <https://doi.org/10.1215/03335372-2005-004>.

<sup>31</sup> Petra M. Schweitzer, *Gendered Testimonies of the Holocaust: Writing Life* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2016), 69.

General interest in the Holocaust would remain low until the Eichmann Trial of 1961, through which Adolf Eichmann, one of the main figures responsible for the Holocaust, was sentenced to death. As a result of the widespread coverage by the international media, the horrors of the Holocaust became more known to the general public and research regarding the Holocaust started to gain momentum. The Holocaust also became a more personal and humanized affair, as Holocaust survivors shared their personal experiences during the trial.<sup>32</sup>

With the rise of oral history and increased media coverage, the late 1970s and 1980s would prove to be a period in which more survivors would start sharing their stories.<sup>33</sup> An additional reason that more Holocaust survivors started sharing their stories during this time, is simply because they were ageing and ‘time pressure’ proved to be the motivational push needed for them to share their stories before it was too late.<sup>34</sup> “Many survivors have reported that after reaching an advanced age they began to feel an uncontrolled urge or need to share their memories, and the defences that allowed them to function began to crack.”<sup>35</sup>

The ever increasing interest in the Holocaust did not mean that all stories were deemed as important, as only in the 1990s there finally seemed to be a genuine interest in the experience of female survivors.<sup>36</sup> Sara Horowitz, professor and researcher specialized in Holocaust literature and gender, argues in her article “Women in Holocaust Literature” that the experiences of women did not only provide insight regarding topics such as menstruation and pregnancy, but showed how women could experience and remember the Holocaust differently compared to male survivors.<sup>37</sup>

Simultaneous with the growing interest in Holocaust memoirs, came an increased interest in misery memoirs (mis lit) during the 1990s. Anne Rothe, associate professor in German and author of *Popular Trauma Culture Selling the Pain of Others in the Mass Media* in which she discusses trauma culture by analysing Holocaust representations in popular culture, argues that trauma in general and misery memoirs in particular, have become popular selling tropes. Rothe notes how within Holocaust literature specifically good versus evil and survivor versus perpetrator have become part of a common and expected storyline. In her work, Rothe

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<sup>32</sup> Hanna Yablonka, “The Formation of Holocaust Consciousness in the State of Israel: The Early Days,” in *Breaking Crystal: Writing and Memory after Auschwitz*, ed. Efraim Sicher (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998), 133.

<sup>33</sup> Assmann, “Genre of Testimony,” 262-63.

<sup>34</sup> Greenspan et al., “Engaging Survivors,” 218-19.

<sup>35</sup> Adi Duchin and Hadas Wiseman, “Memoirs of Child Survivors of the Holocaust: Processing and Healing of Trauma through Writing,” *Qualitative Psychology* 6, no. 3 (2019): 281, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/qup0000128>.

<sup>36</sup> Efraim Sicher, “The Holocaust in the Postmodernist Era,” in *Breaking Crystal: Writing and Memory after Auschwitz*, ed. Efraim Sicher (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998), 317.

<sup>37</sup> Sara R. Horowitz, “Women in Holocaust Literature: Engendering Trauma Memory,” in *Women in the Holocaust*, ed. Dalia Ofer and Lenore Weitzman (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 366.

also argues that the increased interest in Holocaust memoirs is evident from the rise of false memoirs, confirming the value and popularity of legitimate Holocaust memoirs.<sup>38</sup>

The most (in)famous example of a fraudulent memoir is that of Benjamin Wilkomirski: *Fragments: Memories of a Wartime Childhood* (1996), in which he describes his experiences as a supposed Holocaust child survivor.<sup>39</sup> Wilkomirski, real name Bruno Dössekker, had, in fact, no experience with the Holocaust and based his story on documentation about the war.

Rothe adds that since Wilkomirski described his experience in such a way that particular memories were either missing or incredibly detailed, his memoir fits with trauma theory's argument that trauma can exist both outside of regular memory and in great detail.<sup>40</sup> His memoir brought up an important discussion within trauma theory, whether one can be traumatized by the experience of others, arguing that Wilkomirski was perhaps traumatized by the materials he studied and that his memoir might therefore still be valuable to trauma theory research.<sup>41</sup>

Holocaust stories in general are mainly about survival and witnessing. Although the main goal in sharing their stories was different for each survivor, the overlapping ideal seems to be "...to bear witness to the many who did not survive."<sup>42</sup> As we have seen in chapter 1.2 the act of bearing witness also takes an important place within trauma theory. Other common goals were working through trauma, providing evidence to the existence of the camps and teaching future generations about their experiences.<sup>43</sup>

In Adi Duchin and Hadas Wiseman's article "Memoirs of Child Survivors of the Holocaust", in which they study memoirs of Holocaust child survivors that were published roughly sixty years after their experiences, they point out that the writing process was able to provide room for traumatic experiences to integrate into the survivor's general narrative. This example matches with trauma theory, which argues that the act of sharing a story under the right circumstances can help traumatic experiences create a place within general memory.

How survivor testimonies should be read in combination with the influence of trauma is something that Jennifer Geddes, associate professor in Religious Studies, discusses in her article "Towards an Ethics of Reading Survivor Testimonies." According to Geddes, testimonies ask for a different approach compared to the usual scholarship, needing the balance

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<sup>38</sup> Rothe, *Popular Trauma Culture*, 6.

<sup>39</sup> The original version of this memoir *Bruchstücke: Aus einer Kindheit 1939–1948*, was published in 1995 in German.

<sup>40</sup> Rothe, *Popular Trauma Culture*, 147.

<sup>41</sup> Michael Bernard-Donals, "Beyond the Question of Authenticity: Witness and Testimony in the Fragments Controversy," *PMLA* 116, no. 5 (October 2001): 1310, JSTOR.

<sup>42</sup> Jennifer L. Geddes, "Towards an Ethics of Reading Survivor Testimonies," *Studies in the Literary Imagination* 41, no. 2 (Fall 2008): 12, EBSCOhost.

<sup>43</sup> Greenspan et al., "Engaging Survivors," 218-19.

between an empathic and neutral response.<sup>44</sup> That is not to say that all testimonies are the same: “There is a danger of universalizing, of assuming survivors of different atrocities, for example, experience the same thing just because we use the same words to describe what has occurred.”<sup>45</sup>

Research regarding the mental and physical condition of Holocaust survivors started after the war, and reports on this research were published during the early 1950s. The term *concentration camp syndrome* (survivor syndrome) was first used in 1954 to describe the mental suffering of survivors, which had a lot of overlap with what is currently known as PTSD.<sup>46</sup>

According to Duchin and Wiseman, more recent research regarding the wellbeing of Holocaust survivors has “...shown that survivors suffer from posttraumatic stress, and it seems that the severe and enduring psychological effects of the trauma, which include chronic depression, anxiety, guilt, insomnia, and nightmares, were present in the lives of many ...”<sup>47</sup>

“Memory for Trauma-Related Information in Holocaust Survivors with PTSD” is a study comparing how trauma has affected Holocaust memories in different groups; one group of Holocaust survivors with PTSD, one without PTSD and one group of Jewish adults who did not have any experience with the Holocaust. It was concluded that those suffering from PTSD have a more distorted memory of events compared to the other two groups.<sup>48</sup> This specific example displays how trauma can influence memory and is something to take into account when looking at North Korean defector memoirs in the next part of this chapter.

## 2.2 North Korean defector memoirs

While there have been defections from North Korea ever since its foundation in 1948, it was not until the famine of the mid-1990s that those numbers increased rapidly; up to 300,000 are estimated to have escaped.<sup>49</sup> With the main reason for defecting being starvation, some decided to return to North Korea after earning money in China, while others either stayed or moved on to another country.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Geddes, “Towards an Ethics,” 2-14.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>46</sup> Barbara Engelking, *Holocaust and Memory: The Experience of the Holocaust and Its Consequences: An Investigation Based on Personal Narratives*, ed. Gunnar S. Paulsson, trans. Emma Harris (London: Leicester University Press, 2001), 243-44.

<sup>47</sup> Duchin and Wiseman, “Memoirs of Child Survivors,” 281.

<sup>48</sup> Julia A. Golier et al., “Memory for Trauma-Related Information in Holocaust Survivors with PTSD,” *Psychiatry Research* 121, no. 2 (December 2003): 133-43, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0925-4927\(03\)00120-3](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0925-4927(03)00120-3).

<sup>49</sup> “North Korean Refugees,” *Crossing Borders*, accessed December 1, 2021, <https://www.crossingbordersnk.org/north-korean-refugees>.

<sup>50</sup> Tudor, *Ask a North Korean*, 167-69.

Although border security was not that secure at the time, it has been increased ever since, making it more difficult for defectors to escape. Common routes of escape are crossing the Yalu and Tumen River into China with the help of relatives, bribery, brokers, or NGO's.<sup>51</sup> With the increased difficulty of escape, broker fees have also increased rapidly. From China, the main routes to South Korea are crossing the Mongolian border or getting smuggled into Thailand.<sup>52</sup>

According to data from the South Korean Ministry of Unification, as of September 2021, 33,800 North Korean defectors have arrived in the South, out of which an average of 72% is female. The number has continued to grow since the early 2000s, reaching its peak in 2009, and falling into a continuing drop since 2012.<sup>53</sup>

Defectors usually spend some time in China before moving on. That means that the increased numbers in the early 2000s could be a result of people defecting from North Korea during the famine of the mid-1990s. For context: The defectors of the four case studies spent between 1 and 11 years in China, with an average of 5.5 years. The current number of defectors in China is difficult to estimate, as they are illegals in China.<sup>54</sup>

Once they make it to South Korea, the defectors are taken to the National Intelligence Centre where they are first placed in a shared detention room. After a while they are moved to a solitary cell and individually questioned by the NIS for several days. This investigation is mainly focused on facts to confirm the legitimacy of their story and make sure that no North Korean spies or Chinese citizens slip through. The process can take up to three months.<sup>55</sup>

For many defectors, this would likely be the first time sharing their story in such detail and an interrogation like this could very well impact the way defectors intend to tell their story in the future. While trauma might be considered a part of the legitimacy of their story, trauma theory has me questioning whether they would be able to include these traumatic details. However, according to Hyeonseo's experience, some women in the shared detention room gave detailed accounts of their escape from China to Thailand and how they were treated.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Tony Docan-Morgan, Sarah A. Son and Golnar N. Teimouri, "Propaganda, Survival, and Living to Tell the Truth: An Analysis of North Korean Refugee Memoirs," in *The Palgrave Handbook of Deceptive Communication*, ed. Tony Docan-Morgan (n.p.: Palgrave, 2019), 993, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-96334-1\\_51](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-96334-1_51).

<sup>52</sup> Teodora Gyupchanova, "Why Fewer and Fewer North Korean Defectors Are Making It to South Korea," *NK News*, February 27, 2020, <https://www.nknews.org/2020/02/why-fewer-and-fewer-north-korean-defectors-are-making-it-to-south-korea/>.

<sup>53</sup> "Policy on North Korean Defectors," Ministry of Unification, accessed December 7, 2021, [https://www.unikorea.go.kr/eng\\_unikorea/relations/statistics/defectors/](https://www.unikorea.go.kr/eng_unikorea/relations/statistics/defectors/).

<sup>54</sup> Oh et al., *White Paper on Human Rights*, 542.

<sup>55</sup> Eunsun Kim and Sébastien Falletti, *A Thousand Miles to Freedom: My Escape from North Korea*, trans. David Tian (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2015), 175.

<sup>56</sup> Hyeonseo Lee and David John, *The Girl with Seven Names: A North Korean Defector's Story* (London: William Collins, 2015), 202.

After the NIS investigation, defectors are brought to Hanawon: a Settlement Support Centre for North Korean Defectors; founded in 1999 to deal with the growing number of defectors and supported by the Ministry of Unification. Here defectors get a crash course about life in South Korea for three months. They receive funds from the South Korean government and are appointed housing.<sup>57</sup> Six months after arriving in South Korea, they are on their own.

Defectors would try to hide their North Korean identity, since some South Koreans regard them as outsiders or enemies; putting them at a disadvantage in the job market.<sup>58</sup> The period after coming to South Korea is often described as very difficult by defectors and even experienced as traumatic by some.

Comparable to the Holocaust survivors who had a hard time immigrating, I would suggest that the North Korean defectors went through a similar experience while adapting to life in South Korea. Both groups were unable to return to their home country, albeit the North Korean defectors in a more definite way. An important difference to keep in mind is that the North Korean defectors were provided a certain framework while growing up in North Korea, in which what outsiders would consider ‘traumatic’ was considered ‘normal’, whereas Holocaust victims used to have a completely different life before the Holocaust.

Sarah Bregman’s study “Celebrity Defectors”, in which she discusses the formation of the North Korean human rights movement from the late 1990s, explains that due to the mass migration of defectors to South Korea, there was increasingly more interest in North Korean human rights. At the same time, the movement made way for the establishment of North Korean human rights NGO’s.<sup>59</sup> “Representations of oppressed North Koreans in need of liberation are at the centre of the Euro-American North Korean human rights movement. Prison escapee memoirs and documentaries of the North Korean refugee crisis, ...were the beginning of a new genre of North Korean suffering in the post-Cold War era.”<sup>60</sup>

As their stories were included in official reports about North Korea, defector testimonies became increasingly important. Defectors also started to appear on mainstream media, eventually giving way to the phenomenon of ‘celebrity defectors’, which Bregman describes to have a close connection to NGO’s, and is something to keep in mind for chapter 3.2.

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<sup>57</sup> “Hanawon,” Crossing Borders,” accessed December 1, 2021, <https://www.crossingbordersnk.org/hanawon>.

<sup>58</sup> Lee and David, *Seven Names*, 214.

<sup>59</sup> Sarah Bregman, “Celebrity Defectors: Representations of North Korea in Euro-American and South Korean Intimate Publics,” in *Decoding the Sino-North Korean Borderlands*, ed. Adam Cathcart, Christopher Green, and Steven Denney (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2021), 353-58, <https://doi.org/10.5117/9789462987562>.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 356.



Interviews and speeches started becoming a popular medium for North Korean defectors to share their stories. These interviews are often monetarily compensated, tempting the defector to provide the interviewer with the sensational story they are looking for.<sup>61</sup> The most famous example of a defector speech, is Hyeonseo Lee's TED Talk (February 2013), which currently has over twenty-two million views.<sup>62</sup>

The weekly variety show *Now on My Way to Meet You*, airing from 2011 until now, is an example of how defectors became more visible in mainstream media. The show, where both Yeonmi and Hyeonseo have made appearances, features around a dozen of female defectors each episode. It "... attempts to nurture the integration of North Korean refugees into South Korean society; personalization of their plight occurs in conjunction with reminders of a shared Korean identity maintained despite the regime they have fled, which is depicted as cruel, repressive and backward."<sup>63</sup> While generally well received, the show has also received criticism from academics and defectors regarding its backward way of presenting the defectors and the show's initial focus on stories of hardship.<sup>64</sup>

Based on the research for Appendix A, the first memoir to be published in English is *Eyes of the Tailless Animals* by Soon Ok Lee in 1999. We can calculate that the average Time Difference between the Year of Publication and Year of Escape for the English defector memoirs in Appendix A, is 10.5 years (rounded by one decimal). Based on the findings in chapter 2.1, we can conclude that the average Time Difference for Holocaust survivors is much larger, as they sometimes took decades to publish their memoirs. It will be interesting to see if ageing North Korean defectors will also start to feel the need to publish their stories in a later moment in life, possibly causing a surge in the publication of memoirs in the future.

As stated in the introduction, the increased attention for North Korean defector stories also brought increased criticism. The more defectors would share their stories, the more inconsistencies within the different versions of their stories would be pointed out, seemingly damaging the reputation of these memoirs. Two of the defectors that received the most criticism are Dong-hyuk Shin and Yeonmi Park, who will be discussed in chapter 3.2. North Korea also tries its hand at discrediting the defectors' stories, by publishing slanderous videos.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Song, "Stories Fall Apart."

<sup>62</sup> "Hyeonseo Lee my Escape from North Korea," Ted, accessed 6 December, 2021, [https://www.ted.com/talks/hyeonseo\\_lee\\_my\\_escape\\_from\\_north\\_korea#t-714590](https://www.ted.com/talks/hyeonseo_lee_my_escape_from_north_korea#t-714590).

<sup>63</sup> Christopher Green and Stephen Epstein, "Now on My Way to Meet Who? South Korean Television, North Korean Refugees, and the Dilemmas of Representation," *The Asia-Pacific Journal* 11, no. 41.2 (2013): n.p., <https://apjjf.org/2013/11/41/Stephen-Epstein/4007/article.html>.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Maryanne Vollers, "The Woman Who Faces the Wrath of North Korea," *The Guardian*, March 15, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/mar/15/park-yeon-mi-north-korea-defector>.

Research is ongoing regarding the health of North Korean defectors, with an emphasis on mental health of those in South Korea (and China). The focus seems to be on the adjustment to life in South Korea, but not so much on the effect this could have on their memory. Topics such as mental health conditions (PTSD, depression, anxiety, stress and insomnia) are often studied, as well as addiction (smoking, alcohol and internet usage).

According to the study “Correlation between Traumatic Events and Posttraumatic Stress Disorder among North Korean Defectors in South Korea”, which researched the mental health of defectors by looking at the relation between traumatic events and PTSD, trauma was often connected to act of defection and the process of cultural acclimatization.<sup>66</sup> In its follow up study seven years later, it was argued that the trauma of the act of defection had decreased, while that of cultural acclimatization had become more prominent.<sup>67</sup> According to Hyeonseo, the process of cultural acclimatization depends on the lives the defectors left behind in North Korea; with those having led ‘okay’ lives adjusting better compared to those who did not.<sup>68</sup>

Another study on North Korean defectors, which studied a group of defectors with and without PTSD, concluded that PTSD affected memory: “Memory function, but not other neurocognitive functions, was significantly lower in the PTSD group compared with the non-PTSD group.”<sup>69</sup> Which is comparable to the research findings about the Holocaust survivors in chapter 2.1.

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<sup>66</sup> WooTaek Jeon et al., “Correlation between Traumatic Events and Posttraumatic Stress Disorder among North Korean Defectors in South Korea,” *Journal of Traumatic Stress* 18, no. 2 (April 2005): 147-54, <https://doi.org/10.1002/jts.20017>.

<sup>67</sup> Woo-Taek Jeon, Jin-Sup Eom and Sung Kil Min, “A 7-Year Follow-Up Study on the Mental Health of North Korean Defectors in South Korea,” *Journal of Traumatic Stress* 26, no. 1 (February 2013): 158-64, <https://doi.org/10.1002/jts.21783>.

<sup>68</sup> Lee and David, *Seven Names*, 281.

<sup>69</sup> Jung Eun Shin et al., “Association between Memory Impairment and Brain Metabolite Concentrations in North Korean Refugees with Posttraumatic Stress Disorder,” *PLoS ONE* 12, no. 12 (2017): n.p., <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0188953>.

## Chapter 3: Four case studies of North Korean defector memoirs

In this chapter the focus will shift towards the four case studies; Eunsun Kim's *A Thousand Miles to Freedom*, Yeonmi Park's *In Order to Live*, Hyeonseo Lee's *The Girl with Seven Names* and Joseph Kim's *Under the Same Sky*. The chapter's main purpose is to review several basic factors that influence the creation of these memoirs; the involvement of a co-author or ghost-writer, the main goal as pursued by the defector, the safety of North Korean family members, as well as considering the chronology, structure and perspective of the story. Two final factors that will be reviewed are whether the defector has (publicly) shared their story before writing their memoir and if the defector seems to be critical of their memory.

The importance of these six criteria will be explained in the first part of the chapter. In the second part, the four case studies will be introduced and information on the factors mentioned above will be discussed for each separate case study.

### 3.1 Factors of influence

All four memoirs are written with the involvement of a co-author. It is very difficult to conclude how much influence these co-authors had regarding the direction of the story, as their precise level of involvement is not mentioned. To gain some insight regarding the co-authors, their background will be briefly mentioned in the case studies below.

In all four case studies, the defector's full name is printed on the cover in a big font, followed by "with (co-author)" in a smaller font. While versions of the back and front covers differ somewhat among the several editions, it is noteworthy that all four English versions of these memoirs have a recent picture of the defector taking up most of the front or back cover.

Another factor that can be of great influence regarding the general direction of the memoir is the defector's main goal. The main goal the defector wishes to communicate with the reader is often explicitly mentioned in the epigraph, prologue or epilogue of the memoir. The most common reason seems to be that the defector wishes for the suffering of the North Korean people to end and wants to make a difference by publishing their story. The defectors likely have additional motives for publishing their stories, such as monetary gain. As we can only speculate about such motives, the focus will be on the reasons the defectors have provided.

The safety of North Korean family members can also influence the way the defector shares their story. While this reason is not always specifically mentioned in the memoir, we can safely assume that the defector will change or leave out certain details to protect their North Korean family members.

Reviewing story chronology, structure and perspective can inform us what parts of the defector's story are deemed important enough to be included in the memoir. The four memoirs are mainly written chronologically except for the first chapter or prologue, which seems to describe an episode of the defector's life that was particularly rough to draw the reader into the story and show them a snippet of the horror to come.

The four defectors have all told (parts of) their story in public before the publication of their memoirs. This could have provided them with the opportunity to gauge the public's reaction to their story and might in return influence how they would want to share their story in the future. According to trauma theory, by retelling their story it could have been possible for traumatic memories to integrate into the defector's general narrative. As a result, this would also have influenced how their memoir is written.

Lastly, whether or not the defector seems to be critical of their memory, is a criterion I have included as I have noticed that Yeonmi in particular seems to have a critical attitude towards her memory. I will discuss if the other three defectors have also made similar remarks or disclaimers in their memoirs as well as provide a possible explanation for Yeonmi's criticalness.

### 3.2 Case studies

#### *Eunsun Kim*

Eunsun Kim's memoir *A Thousand Miles to Freedom*, was originally published in French in 2012 with co-author Sébastien Falletti. Falletti has a Master degree in both history and EU policy-making and was the Seoul correspondent for the French newspaper *Le Figaro* at the time he worked on the memoir.<sup>70</sup> Based on the French translation, the book was published in several other languages such as Korean (2013) and English (2015). Eunsun shares about the writing process in an NK News article by David Tian, the translator of the English version of her memoir, that: "When we communicated, I spoke in Korean and someone translated the Korean to English for Sébastien, and then Sébastien wrote it down in French."<sup>71</sup> The fact that her story was translated from Korean, into English, into French and later back into English again, means that there was an increased chance for mistranslation.

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<sup>70</sup> "Sebastien Falletti," LinkedIn, accessed December 8, 2021, <https://cn.linkedin.com/in/sebastien-falletti-01619116>.

<sup>71</sup> David Tian, "Opening up about North Korean Defection," *NK News*, September 11, 2015, <https://www.nknews.org/2015/09/opening-up-about-north-korean-defection/>.

The main reason for Eunsun to publish the book seems to be that she wants to draw attention to the suffering of the North Korean people and give them a voice through her story. She also believes reconciliation between North and South Korea is possible and will happen in the future. When the memoir was published she was working for an NGO established in 1996 called “The Citizens’ Alliance for North Korean Human Rights (NKHR) (which) tries to mobilize world leaders to change the fate of the Korean peninsula north of the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel, and help North Korean defectors who have taken refuge in Seoul.”<sup>72</sup>

Eunsun does not share every horrific detail of her story as there are certain elements that she is not ready to include yet.<sup>73</sup> In sharing her story Eunsun also considers the safety of her family members, as at the beginning of the book she adds: “Everything recounted in this book is true. However, to protect the members of my family who still remain in North Korea, I am writing under a pseudonym, and other names and details have been changed.”<sup>74</sup> The first part of this quote demonstrates that Eunsun does not seem to be particularly critical of her memories. The second part illustrates how the element of safety plays a role in the decision to exclude or change certain details of the story.

Eunsun’s story is primarily portrayed in chronological order, except for the first and second chapters. The first chapter starts in December 1997 and describes Eunsun almost dying of starvation. The second chapter begins in March 2011, providing some insight into her current life as a contrast. Eunsun describes her past experiences through the lens of her current knowledge. She will connect her personal experience with that of others in North Korea, providing a broader view by zooming out periodically.

Based on the information provided in her memoir, we can conclude that Eunsun has shared her story a few times before publishing her story. The first time she tells her story seems to be during the investigation by the NIS after arriving in South Korea in 2006. It is of course possible she shared (parts of) her story before this, but this information is not included in her memoir. About the NIS investigation Eunsun recalls: “Each day, I had to retell my story, recounting every detail of my life in Eundeok and our escape. I had to give dates, addresses, and names that I no longer remembered.”<sup>75</sup> A second time where Eunsun tells her story is when she goes back to school in South Korea. She eventually shares her story by giving interviews.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Kim and Falletti, *Thousand Miles*, 226.

<sup>73</sup> Tian, “North Korean Defection.”

<sup>74</sup> Kim and Falletti, *Thousand Miles*, n.p.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 174.

<sup>76</sup> Tian, “North Korean Defection.”

### *Yeonmi Park*

Yeonmi Park's memoir *In Order to Live*, written with co-author Maryanne Vollers was first published in English in 2015. The Korean version is a translation of the English version and was published two months after the release of the original. Maryanne Vollers is an author and has been a ghost-writer for a few projects, out of which Hillary Rodham Clinton's memoir *Living History* (2003) is perhaps the most noteworthy.<sup>77</sup> Yeonmi was studying English by the time she was working on the memoir, which may have helped to communicate her story.

Yeonmi considers herself a human rights activist and is also introduced as such on the jacket of the book. She wants to raise awareness about the situation in North Korea and puts a big emphasis on freedom, which is evident from the epigraph at the beginning of the book: "For my family, and for anyone, anywhere, struggling for freedom."<sup>78</sup>

The memoir is chronological except for the prologue, which starts with her moment of escape from North Korea in 2007, and the first chapter which is about Yeonmi's birth and childhood. From the second chapter onwards the story is told in chronological order, starting with Yeonmi's family history. Yeonmi tells her story from a past perspective while making statements from the present. Yeonmi incorporates some North Korean history and public events in her narrative, probably to help the reader understand her situation better. She keeps comparing past situations to her current life, which is understandable as the way you remember your past will keep changing because of your current experiences. But one could also argue that these comparisons are included to present the reader with a life they can identify themselves with. This raises a question we cannot answer: What is done for the reader and what is done for memories' sake?

Yeonmi speaks about putting family members into danger by sharing her story, but does not include whether or not she changed certain details to protect them: "For all my relatives who are still in North Korea and suffering from oppression: I feel extremely guilty to put you all in danger, but I hope that someday you will all understand why I had to speak up."<sup>79</sup>

According to her memoir, the first time Yeonmi had to share her story was in 2009 when she was fifteen years old. She had to tell (part of) her story to a pastor who was helping Yeonmi and her mother prepare for their journey to escape to Mongolia. The pastor did not respond well to her and her mother's stories, which seems to have left a lasting impact on her. The second

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<sup>77</sup> "About," Maryanne Vollers, accessed December 8, 2021, <https://maryannevollers.com/about/>.

<sup>78</sup> Yeonmi Park and Maryanne Vollers, *In Order to Live: A North Korean Girl's Journey to Freedom* (New York: Penguin Press, 2015).

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 272-73.

time she shares her story is in 2009 when she is being interviewed by the NIS. In the following years, Yeonmi told her story several times through global interviews and television appearances. Particularly her speech at *One Young World Summit* in 2014, which has currently accumulated over eighty-two million views online, helped Yeonmi's memoir become a popular release.<sup>80</sup>

Simultaneous with the increased interest in Yeonmi's story came the criticism, claiming that Yeonmi's story differed with each retelling. The contents of her speech did not seem to completely match with previous interviews, nor with the image that the producers and Yeonmi had painted during her appearance on *Now on My Way to Meet You*. As a result, some elements of her story were discredited by other defectors and North Korea experts.<sup>81</sup>

Yeonmi and Vollers were aware of the criticism while working on the memoir. They have claimed that most of the inconsistencies were due to a language barrier and the fact Yeonmi did not want to share her memories of China.<sup>82</sup> In the prologue of her memoir Yeonmi also admits that this is the first time she is telling the complete story. In chapter twenty-four she goes deeper into the lies she told about her time in China while providing her reasons. These two parts can be regarded as a disclaimer or an explanation regarding previous inconsistencies.

In the memoir, Yeonmi seems to give off the impression that she is somewhat critical of her memory. She admits that she has repressed a lot of memories in the past and is only now trying to make sense of them while writing her memoir. She also reveals that not all of her memories were as clear and that it took effort to organize them in a way that seemed logical.

### *Hyeonseo Lee*

Hyeonseo Lee's memoir *The Girl with Seven Names*, was published in 2015 in English with co-author David John.<sup>83</sup> David John is a book editor and (co-)author of three books. His first work is a fictional story called *Flight from Berlin* (2012) and his newest book *Star of the North* (2018), is a fictional thriller about kidnapping by North Korea.<sup>84</sup> The fact that Hyeonseo studied English before writing this memoir might have been beneficial to the writing process.

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<sup>80</sup> "Ambassador Yeonmi Park's Video Reaches 82 Million Views," *One Young World*, accessed December 8 2021, <https://www.oneyoungworld.com/news-item/ambassador-yeonmi-park-s-video-reaches-82-million-views>.

<sup>81</sup> Mary Ann Jolley, "The Strange Tale of Yeonmi Park," *The Diplomat*, December 10, 2014, <https://thediplomat.com/2014/12/the-strange-tale-of-yeonmi-park/>.

<sup>82</sup> Vollers, "Wrath of North Korea."

<sup>83</sup> The sub-title has seemingly been adjusted from *A North Korean Defector's Story to Escape from North Korea* from the 2016 edition onwards.

<sup>84</sup> "D.B. John," Goodreads, accessed December 9, 2021, [https://www.goodreads.com/author/show/17133014.D\\_B\\_John](https://www.goodreads.com/author/show/17133014.D_B_John).

As a human rights activist, it seems to be Hyeonseo's main goal to bring the North Korean human rights situation to light. Hyeonseo believes reunification will happen in the future although it will not be easy.

The story is told chronologically except for the introduction, where Hyeonseo describes her TED talk of 2013, and the prologue, in which she describes an episode where their house burned down when she was thirteen years old. Hyeonseo tells her story from a past perspective while making statements from the present, adding insights that she was not aware of at the time. She will make references to historical events such as the Cold War. At the end of each chapter, she will often foreshadow what is to come in the next, most likely done to intrigue the reader.

The first time Hyeonseo told her story seems to have been when she met other North Koreans while living in Shenyang, although it is not clear how much she shared with them. The second time she told her story was to her South Korean boyfriend in 2007. There are a few instances where she is in contact with other North Koreans, but it is not clear whether she shared her story with them. In 2008 Hyeonseo shared her experiences during the NIS investigation.

In the years before publishing her story, she had shared her story publicly in meetings and through speeches. Human rights seem to become increasingly more important for Hyeonseo as she continues to share her story. The immense popularity of Hyeonseo's TED Talk in 2013, mentioned in chapter 2.2, helped create momentum for the release of her memoir which became a New York Times bestseller.<sup>85</sup> In 2013 she had also shared her story with the UNHCR COI.

Based on the following statement provided in the *Author's Note* at the beginning of the book, Hyeonseo does not seem necessarily critical of her memory: "To protect relatives and friends still in North Korea, I have changed some names in this book and withheld other details. Otherwise, all the events described happened as I remembered or was told about them."<sup>86</sup> This statement is comparable to Eunsun's, who also changed details to protect her family and considers the events she shares to be true.

### *Joseph Kim*

Joseph Kim's memoir *Under the Same Sky*, was published in 2015 in English with co-author Stephan Talty. Stephan Talty is a freelance journalist and author of both fiction and nonfiction.<sup>87</sup> In the Acknowledgements chapter, Joseph thanks his co-author: "I'm not sure I could ever

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<sup>85</sup> "The Girl with Seven Names - New York Times Bestseller," Hyeonseo Lee, accessed December 9, 2021, [http://www.hyeonseo-lee.com/eng/the-girl-with-seven-names-new-york-times-bestseller\\_30512.shtml](http://www.hyeonseo-lee.com/eng/the-girl-with-seven-names-new-york-times-bestseller_30512.shtml).

<sup>86</sup> Lee and David, *Seven Names*, n.p.

<sup>87</sup> "Stephan Talty," Goodreads, accessed December 9, 2021, [https://www.goodreads.com/author/show/39755.Stephan\\_Talty](https://www.goodreads.com/author/show/39755.Stephan_Talty).



express quite how grateful I am to you. ... and for your commitment to helping me tell my story as thoroughly and accurately as possible.” As at the time of writing the memoir Joseph had lived in America for over seven years, attending high school and college, communicating in English was unlikely to be an issue.

Joseph wants to bring the suffering of the North Korean people to light and help them achieve the same freedom he has. An event which I believe to be of great influence on Joseph’s willingness to write a memoir, is his visit to the LiNK office: “These people were sacrificing the American dream to help people like me. That moved me tremendously.”<sup>88</sup>

The story is mainly told chronologically, aside from the prologue, in which Joseph describes his horrible experience in a detention centre. Joseph tells his story from a past perspective, while sometimes making remarks from the present.

In contrast to the three case studies discussed above, Joseph went to America directly and was therefore not interviewed by the NIS. Joseph’s first time sharing his story might have been when he received help from a Christian church in China, although it is difficult to say how much of his story he would have shared. Sometime later Joseph told his story to an American LiNK affiliate, who wanted to offer him a chance to go to America. After spending four years in America, Joseph starts speaking at conferences in 2011. Although he found this to be a rewarding experience, he also notes that sharing his story was not always easy. His most viewed speech is his TED Talk of June 2013, which currently has over three million views.<sup>89</sup>

Considering the issue of the safety of his family members Joseph shares: “Some of the individuals I knew in China and North Korea are still at risk today. Their names have been changed.”<sup>90</sup> Although he only mentions that their names have been changed, some other details may have been adjusted for the safety of others.

There is no specific indication that Joseph is critical of his memory, yet he does seem to be aware that there are times where he cannot remember clearly, contrasting with times where he remembers details abundantly. About his experience in 2004 he writes how there are months he cannot remember. Whereas he mentions the following about the short time he was able to go to school again in 2005: “Strange, it looms large in my memory now; I remember more details about that short time that I do about entire other years of my life.”<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> Joseph Kim and Stephan Talty, *Under the Same Sky: From Starvation in North Korea to Salvation in America* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2015), 261.

<sup>89</sup> “Joseph Kim the Family I Lost in North Korea and the Family I Gained,” Ted, accessed 6 December, 2021, [https://www.ted.com/talks/joseph\\_kim\\_the\\_family\\_i\\_lost\\_in\\_north\\_korea\\_and\\_the\\_family\\_i\\_gained?language=t#t-814600](https://www.ted.com/talks/joseph_kim_the_family_i_lost_in_north_korea_and_the_family_i_gained?language=t#t-814600)

<sup>90</sup> Kim and Talty, *Same Sky*, n.p.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 199.

## Chapter 4: Common story elements

The first part of this chapter will provide a summary regarding the contents of the four memoirs and discuss some commonalities as well as differences between them. Additionally, the Time Difference between the Year of Experience and the Year of Publication will also be discussed for each memoir.<sup>92</sup> The second part of the chapter will focus solely on common story elements and conclude whether or not defector memoirs are to be considered a genre of its own.

### 4.1 Case studies

#### *Eunsun Kim*

Eunsun Kim, a pseudonym, was born in 1986 and grew up in Eundeok, in the northeast of North Korea, very close to the Tumen River and Chinese border. She escaped North Korea for the first time with her mother and sister in 1998 at the age of eleven due to the famine. After being captured by the Chinese police in 2002, they are sent back to North Korea where they eventually manage to escape to China for a second time. In 2006 Eunsun and her mother escape to Mongolia with the help of smugglers and arrive in South Korea a few months later. When the original French version of her memoir was published in 2012, Eunsun was twenty-five years old, signifying that the memories of her life in North Korea were at least fourteen years old.

The book has seventeen chapters and an epilogue. In chapters one through seven Eunsun describes her childhood in North Korea. Chapter eight is about her escape to China for the first time in 1998. Chapters eight through thirteen are about Eunsun's hardships in China and her time in the re-education camp in North Korea. Chapter fourteen is devoted to her time in Mongolia. Chapters fifteen to seventeen discuss her life in South Korea.

Eunsun describes her childhood as being 'fine' until the famine of the mid-1990s. Although Eunsun does not seem to include the usual family background story about how her parents grew up and met, we can conclude that her family had a good background.

From late 1997 onwards her story evolves into one about survival. After the death of her father, her mother decides that they have to escape to China to survive. In China, her family is sold to a Chinese farmer by human traffickers and treated like slaves.

Unique about her story compared to the other case studies, is that Eunsun, her mother and sister get taken by the Chinese police and are sent back to North Korea, where they are forced into a re-education camp. Eventually they manage to get back to China.

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<sup>92</sup> Please refer to Appendix A and B for a full overview of relevant dates.

### *Yeonmi Park*

Yeonmi Park, born in 1993, grew up in Hyesan, in the northeast of North Korea, next to the Yalu River and the Chinese border. She escaped North Korea due to the famine with her mother in 2007 when she was thirteen years old. In 2009 Yeonmi and her mother escape to Mongolia with the help of Christian missionaries, arriving in South Korea a few months later. When the English version of her memoir was published in 2015, Yeonmi was twenty-one years old, meaning that the memories of her life in North Korea were at least eight years old.

The book is divided into three main parts, totalling twenty-four chapters. “Part One: North Korea” in which Yeonmi describes her life in North Korea growing up during the great famine of the mid-1990s and her escape to China. “Part Two: China” is about her hardships in China, ending in her escape to Mongolia via the Gobi Desert. “Part Three: South Korea” is about her arrival and life in South Korea.

Yeonmi spends two chapters sharing her family history. Her family had a good background, which impacted her quality of life. A big part of her story about North Korea is about the Black Market, which her father was involved in. She describes how her father was arrested for illegal trading and how she eventually had to eat plants and bugs to stay alive.

After escaping to China with her mother, Yeonmi gets sold to a man and is forced to help him with his broker business. Her experiences in China offer a unique perspective of someone that was directly involved in human trafficking.

Another noteworthy element about her time in China is the rape she had to endure, which affected her both mentally and physically. The following passage shows how her concept of what happened to her changed over time and is an example of how one’s interpretation of a memory can change: “For a long time I thought of it as a business negotiation, not rape. Only now, with the passage of time, can I accept what transpired in all its terrible dimensions.”<sup>93</sup>

### *Hyeonseo Lee*

Hyeonseo Lee, not her birth name, was born in Hyesan, North Korea, in 1980. Hyeonseo crossed the frozen Yalu River by herself in 1997 when she was seventeen years old. After spending eleven years in China, she escaped to South Korea in 2008. When her memoir was published in 2015, she was thirty-five years old, meaning that the memories of her life in North Korea were at least eighteen years old. Hyeonseo’s Time Difference between the Year of Publication and Year of Escape is the largest among the English defector memoirs.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> Park and Vollers, *Order to Live*, 146.

<sup>94</sup> Please refer to Appendix A.

The book consists of fifty-three chapters divided into three main parts, all approximately a hundred pages each. “Part One: The Greatest Nation on Earth,” is mainly about Hyeonseo growing up in North Korea, ending with a chapter where she crosses the Yalu River to China. “Part Two: To the Heart of the Dragon,” is about her struggles in China. “Part Three: Journey into Darkness,” is about her arrival in South Korea, the investigation by the NIS, experience at Hanawon and getting her family members to South Korea.

Hyeonseo begins her story by telling how her mother and father met. She grew up in a family with a good background and did not seem to personally have experienced starvation in North Korea. The way she describes her experiences growing up makes it seem like she had a good and perhaps even privileged childhood.

Another unique element to her story is that Hyeonseo did not actually plan on escaping North Korea, but crossed the river out of ‘curiosity’, only planning on staying in China with relatives for a few days and returning afterwards.

Compared to her time in North Korea she experienced more hardships in China. Hyeonseo describes feeling very displaced and having repeated nightmares about her family. She also shares how she became depressed and suicidal after being triggered by the results of a medical check-up.

Her method of escaping to South Korea is also uncommon, as she managed to fly directly from China to South Korea. The fact that Hyeonseo personally goes back to the China-North Korea border in 2009 to help her mother and brother escape, personally guiding them through China, is also remarkable.

### *Joseph Kim*

Joseph Kim, birth name Kwang Jin Kim, was born in 1990. He grew up in Hoeryong, in the northeast of North Korea, next to the Tumen River and the Chinese border. He escaped North Korea by himself in 2006 when he was fifteen years old. After a year in China, he escaped to America in 2007 through the U.S. consulate in China. When his memoir was published in 2015, Joseph was twenty-four years old, meaning that the memories of his life in North Korea were at least nine years old.

The book is divided into fifty-seven chapters, a prologue and an epilogue. Chapter one through forty-seven describe Joseph’s childhood in North Korea with increasing hardships and starvation. In chapter forty-seven he describes crossing the Tumen River to earn some money, with the intention to return to North Korea to buy his mother out of prison. Chapter forty-eight through fifty-seven focus on his time in China, ending with his arrival at the U.S. consulate.

Joseph does not discuss his family's background in his memoir. The main focus of his story is instead on the famine and what he had to do to survive. An interesting point about his story is how people that were considered good or nice before the famine turn 'evil' or 'selfish' to survive.

Joseph's experience in China is unique compared to that of the other three defectors. That is not to say Joseph did not encounter any hardships while in China, such as sleeping outside and begging for food. However, within a week or so, Joseph managed to get in contact with his first Christian church that provided him with food, clothes and some money. His time in China is mainly about food, discovering what life in China is like, rediscovering himself and getting into Christianity. Joseph does consider his time in China as part of his suffering.

Only the epilogue of his memoir is about his life in America, which seems short compared to the other case studies.

#### 4.2 Concluding the common

The four defectors discussed above all grew up in towns in the northeast of North Korea near the Chinese border. In general, their memoirs describe what their daily lives looked like, whilst connecting their stories to more known happenings and historic events of North Korea, such as the Public Distribution System and the death of Kim Il-sung (1994). Their stories are often told as a gradually worsening situation, with its peak right before the moment of escape to China.

The beginning of their childhood is not necessarily described as a bad experience. This changes when the famine of the mid-1990s starts to spread. A difference in experience between the four defectors is that Hyeonseo and Eunsun, who were born in the 1980s, had a longer 'okay' childhood until the famine struck, compared to Yeonmi and Joseph, who were born in the 1990s.

One common story element related to famine, except in Hyeonseo's case, is that their parents tried to do anything they could to make sure their family survived. They also tried to make ends meet by visiting other family members or relatives for help.

During the famine, their lives are often described through starvation and suffering, with the defectors having to eat weeds, frogs, grasshoppers and the like to survive. The famine seemed to cause a chain reaction, increasing cases of theft, rape and cannibalism. The importance of the black market as a means for people to try to survive is also often discussed.

The next common story element is escaping North Korea by crossing the frozen Yalu River or Tumen River, which, as we have seen in chapter 2.2, is the most common way for defectors to escape North Korea. Their time in China is mostly described as a time of suffering, of which topics such as rape and human trafficking are the most notable.

Their period in China is concluded by yet another escape: to South Korea via the Mongolian dessert (Eunsun and Yeonmi), by plane (Hyeonseo), or to America via the U.S. consulate with the help of an NGO (Joseph). The defectors express their gratitude after arriving in South Korea or America, while at the same time having a hard time adjusting to their new life.

In sum, the main emphasis of these memoirs is on survival and what had to be done to survive, perhaps even justifying decision-making in regards to survival. This is comparable to what we have seen in Holocaust writing, which is mainly about survival and witnessing. An important difference is that the North Korean defectors are witnessing an event that is currently still ongoing, which might result in a higher urgency to share their stories.

These four defector memoirs seem to create a certain expectation for future North Korean defector memoirs. The way these stories are set up, received and also ‘judged’, are an indication that these defector memoirs have become a genre of its own over the past decade or so. This seemingly typical story-set up with common story elements is comparable to Holocaust memoirs, and is something I also noticed in my previous research regarding the memoirs of comfort women. It seems as if the publication of ‘shared’ traumatic experiences that could be considered misery memoirs, such as the Holocaust, comfort women and North Korean defectors, create sub-genres that come with certain expectations.

## Chapter 5: Traumatic story elements

In the first and second chapters, we have established a clear connection between trauma and memoir writing. The purpose of this final chapter is to study the (in)visibility of trauma in North Korean defector memoirs, by determining how trauma is included or excluded from the four case studies specifically.<sup>95</sup>

As trauma is very personal, there is no definitive list of experiences that can be considered traumatic. The list of traumatic story elements discussed below is based first on the common story elements that were discussed in chapter 4.2 since these common story elements are connected to what can be considered a traumatic experience. Secondly, the list below is based on research regarding the mental wellbeing of North Korean defectors. As concluded in chapter 2.2, the act of defection and cultural acclimatization is often considered traumatic. Finally, by looking at the way specific events are described in the four case studies, we are able to determine additional traumatic story elements. For a trauma element to be considered as ‘widely discussed’, it should appear in at least half of the discussed case studies.

Based on the criteria mentioned above, the topics that will be discussed are as follows; 1. Public execution and dead bodies, 2. Famine and poverty, 3. Detention centre and prison camp, 4. The act of defecting, 5. Rape and human trafficking, 6. Cultural acclimatization. The order of these topics is based on the order in which most of these events were experienced or discussed in the memoirs.

Some of these topics are also discussed in the prologues of the memoirs, such as dying of hunger (Eunsun), escaping via the frozen Yalu River (Yeonmi) and getting beaten up in a detention centre (Joseph). This seems to match with Rothe’s statement from chapter 2.1, which argues that traumatic experiences are used to captivate the reader and that trauma therefore becomes a trope in selling the book.<sup>96</sup>

In regards to the main goal presented by defectors in writing these memoirs, ending the suffering of the North Korean people, one might suspect there to be an emphasis on the defectors’ suffering and the suffering of the North Korean people in general, therefore leading to the inclusion of traumatic events. In the four case studies, however, descriptions such as “this was traumatic”, “I was traumatized” or trauma-related terminology are rarely used. However, based on the context and the specific words used to express their experiences, one can still determine whether or not the events discussed below could indeed be considered traumatic.

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<sup>95</sup> Please refer to Appendix C for a full overview of defector quotes used in this chapter.

<sup>96</sup> Rothe, *Popular Trauma Culture*, 90.

*1 Public execution (Eunsun, Yeonmi, Hyeonseo) and dead bodies (Yeonmi, Hyeonseo, Joseph)*

Three of the memoirs include an episode describing their (first) public execution at a young age.

When Eunsun is very young, she describes in pretty graphic detail how her school made her witness a public execution: "... I could make out gigantic puddles of blood, littered with pieces of flesh mixed with a white liquid."<sup>97</sup> "... I became used to these public executions, which were a routine occurrence."<sup>98</sup> The fact that it became a "routine occurrence" might have caused Eunsun to, unconsciously, create a framework in which the experience of public executions could be placed.

Yeonmi also discusses the execution of a man when she was young: "Three men with rifles stood in front of him and begin firing. ... the dead man flopped to the ground."<sup>99</sup> It is not completely clear whether she witnessed it personally, judging from the context wherein she describes how her mother was in shock after this event, but does not include her own reaction. It is also possible that the event was so traumatic that Yeonmi has disassociated herself from it.

Hyeonseo was seven years old when she discovered the scene of a public hanging by accident. By the time she had realized what people were looking at, a man was already hanging lifelessly from a rope: "The most random detail stuck in my mind. I remember how the man standing next to me lit a cigarette ... . Suddenly it seemed like there was no air to breathe. I had to get out of there. I almost fought my way out."<sup>100</sup> Judging from her reaction it seems likely this was her first public execution. In contrast, Hyeonseo later mentions another public execution she witnessed when she was 14 years old, describing the event in a very neutral tone, almost as if she was not present.<sup>101</sup>

Although Joseph's memoir does not include an episode of his (first) public execution, we cannot conclude that he did not witness any public executions, merely that the event was not included in his memoir.

Aside from public executions, dead bodies are also described by Yeonmi, Hyeonseo and Joseph.

While Yeonmi describes a few instances where she encountered dead bodies, the following two specific experiences seem to have made a big impact on her. The first concerns when she stayed in the hospital and discovered that dead bodies were kept in the yard: "It was the most terrible sight I have ever seen. ... They come to me in my nightmares and I wake up

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<sup>97</sup> Kim and Falletti, *Thousand Miles*, 114

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, 115.

<sup>99</sup> Park and Vollers, *Order to Live*, 51.

<sup>100</sup> Lee and David, *Seven Names*, 27.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, 74.



screaming.”<sup>102</sup> She describes another experience: “The frozen babies that starving mothers abandoned in the alleys did not fit into my worldview, so I couldn’t process what I saw. It was normal to see bodies in the trash heaps, bodies floating in the river ...”<sup>103</sup> Yeonmi’s comment raises the question whether something can still be traumatic if it is considered ‘normal’. In accordance with trauma theory, we could argue that when an experience can be related to an existing frame of reference it would generally not be considered traumatic.

Hyeonseo also shares a few instances of encountering dead bodies. The most striking encounter was when her friend brought Hyeonseo to see a dead newborn baby in a public toilet: “Next to the hole of the squat toilet was a bloodied white plastic bag. Inside was a dead baby with a tiny blue-pink face. ... I was shocked to the core and didn’t sleep that night.”<sup>104</sup>

Joseph also includes a few encounters, of which perhaps the most noteworthy example is: “... I saw a man carrying a corpse on his back ... It wasn’t like the other bodies I’d seen before. The top half, including the head, was burned to a blackened crisp.”<sup>105</sup> This instance indicates that he had seen more dead bodies previously. Joseph does not necessarily describe this experience as traumatic, but he does feel sick after watching the scene.

## 2. *Famine and poverty (Eunsun, Yeonmi, Hyeonseo, Joseph)*

In their memoirs, the defectors describe how the famine started slowly, with increasingly less food and more power outages, and how this impacted society and quality of life as a whole. The examples below are about their experiences with starvation specifically, as these examples seemed to be the most impactful based on their descriptions.

Eunsun starts her story by describing how she believes to be dying: “... I was completely exhausted after several days without eating. I was sure that I was about to die of hunger.”<sup>106</sup>

Yeonmi describes how bad her family’s situation was right before she escaped to China: “It’s still painful to think about that time. That’s all any of us wanted: just to eat.”<sup>107</sup>

Due to Hyeonseo’s family being well off, she had no personal experience regarding the famine. Descriptions of famine in her memoir are only about the starvation of others, such as seeing a starved woman with a baby at the market: “They were pale and skeletal, and dressed in rags.”<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> Park and Vollers, *Order to Live*, 112-13.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.

<sup>104</sup> Lee and David, *Seven Names*, 76.

<sup>105</sup> Kim and Talty, *Same Sky*, 31.

<sup>106</sup> Kim and Falletti, *Thousand Miles*, 2.

<sup>107</sup> Park and Vollers, *Order to Live*, 116.

<sup>108</sup> Lee and David, *Seven Names*, 80.

Joseph describes how he was in immense physical pain because of hunger and how it affected his mental state: “I didn’t feel human anymore. ... The wandering sparrow has only one thought -food- and one emotion, ... *I don’t want to die.*”<sup>109</sup>

Joseph and Hyeonseo specifically mention the topic of rumours regarding cannibalism. While Hyeonseo simply mentions the rumours, Joseph was worried that he might have eaten human flesh by accident. “I felt my stomach do a flip. ... Had I eaten a human being? If I did, I was now a cannibal.”<sup>110</sup>

### 3. *Detention centre and prison camp* (Eunsun, Yeonmi, Hyeonseo, Joseph)

Descriptions of detention centres and prison camps are included in the narrative when the defector either describes their own experience or that of family members.

Eunsun provides a very graphic and detailed narrative regarding her experience in Chongjin prison, where she was brought after her capture in China: “I was completely naked and being subjected to humiliating torment. ... a female officer in uniform grabbed me extremely hard. ... she continued to search my body by pushing her fingers inside me.”<sup>111</sup> Based on her retelling of the event, the choice of words and details in this description, I would conclude that this experience must have been traumatizing for Eunsun to the extent that she is still able to remember the details of what happened.

Yeonmi describes her father’s experience of getting arrested, being put in a detention centre and later in a re-education labour camp.

Hyeonseo shares the experiences of others, such as her uncle and other defectors she met during her time in the NIS shared detention room.

Joseph’s memoir starts with descriptions of his suffering at Saro-cheong Detention Centre, where he gets beaten regularly: “... the place terrified me. The day before, I’d seen a teenager beaten so severely I was sure he was brain-damaged, ...”<sup>112</sup>

### 4. *The act of defecting* (Eunsun, Yeonmi, Hyeonseo, Joseph)

The act of defection is often considered traumatic by defectors, as supported by the research in chapter 2.2. The trauma is perhaps more deeply rooted in the meaning of the defection compared to the physical act of defecting, which is what is mainly highlighted in these memoirs.

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<sup>109</sup> Kim and Talty, *Same Sky*, 130.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

<sup>111</sup> Kim and Falletti, *Thousand Miles*, 111-12.

<sup>112</sup> Kim and Talty, *Same Sky*, vii.

Eunsun shares her worries about getting shot while crossing the Tumen River: “My anxiety started to build. ... What if this time the soldiers shot us down?”<sup>113</sup> While the act of defecting itself probably only took minutes, Eunsun describes that “... it felt like an eternity.”<sup>114</sup>

Yeonmi’s memoir starts with the moment of her defection in the prologue. She describes her escape via the frozen Yalu River: “I was so scared I was completely paralyzed.”<sup>115</sup>

Regarding Hyeonseo’s act of defecting, I would argue that Hyeonseo leaving for South Korea could be considered her conscious act of defecting, as she did not consider nor describe her act of crossing the Yalu River as defecting. About her flight to South Korea she shares: “I felt a wave of terror. ... My heart was racing. I was excited, and very frightened.”<sup>116</sup>

As Joseph’s initial intention in going to China was to make some money and go back to North Korea, I would argue that this was not a fully conscious act of defection. While crossing the Tumen River Joseph describes: “I was shaking with fear ...”<sup>117</sup>

##### *5. Rape and human trafficking (in China) (Eunsun, Yeonmi, Hyeonseo, Joseph)*

The topic of rape and human trafficking seems to constitute the biggest difference between the experience of male and female defectors. As we have seen in chapter 2.1, there were certain issues that women had to deal with in the concentration camps that men did not, this is also true for the North Korean defector case. This difference in experience consequently creates a difference in trauma as well.

When describing how Eunsun and her mother and sister had become victims to human traffickers, she explains that they were lucky in comparison to other women, who became victims to “... forced prostitution in brothels and karaoke lounges. ... These victims are scarred for life, and many feel ashamed of their past.”<sup>118</sup>

About the time she was raped in China, Yeonmi shares: “I was so scared, and the act was so painful and disgusting and violent that I thought it couldn’t really be happening to me. After a while I actually felt like I had left my body ...”<sup>119</sup> It seems that Yeonmi had disassociated from the event of getting raped. She also starts hurting herself to deal with her trauma. Yeonmi has a really difficult time after the rape; throwing up, being numb, and not being able to eat much.

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<sup>113</sup> Kim and Falletti, *Thousand Miles*, 70.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

<sup>115</sup> Park and Vollers, *Order to Live*, 2.

<sup>116</sup> Lee and David, *Seven Names*, 193.

<sup>117</sup> Kim and Talty, *Same Sky*, 208.

<sup>118</sup> Kim and Falletti, *Thousand Miles*, 107.

<sup>119</sup> Park and Vollers, *Order to Live*, 146.

Hyeonseo is threatened with rape by gang members when her plan to smuggle her family across the North Korean border gets her in trouble. The gang members keep her locked up in an apartment for days, where she overhears one member suggesting they should have their way with her (the word rape is not explicitly used). “*Please no. Until this moment I’d been in that strange calm emergency mode ... Now I was losing it. ... My body began trembling and refused to stop.*”<sup>120</sup> The experience left a big impact on Hyeonseo and she became physically ill as a result.

Joseph does not seem to have any personal experience regarding rape, but he does mention how female defectors are tricked into going to China where they get trafficked and raped. Joseph also shares that women were getting raped at night in the detention centre.

#### *6. Cultural acclimatization (Eunsun, Yeonmi, Hyeonseo, Joseph)*

As we have seen in chapter 2.2 on the mental state of North Korean defectors, cultural acclimatization was also often experienced as traumatic. The period in which these defectors are supposed to get accustomed to life in South Korea (or in Joseph’s case America) is often described as something traumatic. Perhaps this can be best explained by referring to what Van Alphen referred to as ‘lack of framework’, since defectors enter a world that does not make sense according to their existing framework.

Eunsun admits that having lived in China for around eight years, the transition to life in South Korea might have been easier for her compared to other defectors.<sup>121</sup> That is not to say her adjustment to life in South Korea was without struggles: “... all of a sudden, I was overcome by an immense feeling of sadness. It was as if everything, all the burdens and hardships of the past nine years, came back to me at that moment.”<sup>122</sup> I believe this response to her new reality was a result of finally being in a ‘safe’ place where she could exit the survival mode she had been in for so long.

Yeonmi had trouble accepting that she was no longer in North Korea and she describes adjusting to life in South Korea as a difficult process. Yeonmi mentions feeling very numb, as if her current experiences were not real, and that she is struggling mentally: “In North Korea, we don’t have words for “depression” or “posttraumatic stress,” so I had no idea what those things were or whether I might be suffering because of them.”<sup>123</sup>

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<sup>120</sup> Lee and David, *Seven Names*, 152.

<sup>121</sup> Tian, “North Korean Defection.”

<sup>122</sup> Kim and Falletti, *Thousand Miles*, 185.

<sup>123</sup> Park and Vollers, *Order to Live*, 219.

Comparable to Eunsun, Hyeonseo also mentions that her cultural acclimatization to South Korea might have been easier compared to other defectors because of her long stay in China. I would also argue that for both Eunsun and Hyeonseo their experiences in China had already broadened their framework, allowing for a relatively smooth transition to life in South Korea. Hyeonseo describes that for many defectors it is difficult to let go of their old lives and adjust to their new reality: “Some suffered breakdowns, or panic attacks at the thought of the super-competitive job market ...”<sup>124</sup>

Joseph is struggling once he gets to America, where he is put with foster parents who only spoke English: “I felt scared and lonely and lost.”<sup>125</sup> Joseph felt very out of place and uses words such as “nightmare” to describe his high school experience in America.<sup>126</sup> He starts suffering from depression around the time he starts college in 2011, which he suspects was due to survivor’s guilt.

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<sup>124</sup> Lee and David, *Seven Names*, 209.

<sup>125</sup> Kim and Talty, *Same Sky*, 259.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*, 260.

## Conclusion

In this study about North Korean defector memoirs, I have attempted to add to the current debate regarding the interpretation of North Korean defector memoirs, by interpreting them through trauma theory and answering the question: “What understanding can trauma theory provide us concerning North Korean defector memoirs?”

In the first chapter, *Trauma theory*, I have introduced the interdisciplinary field of trauma theory and explained how psychological trauma is caused by a lack of framework. I have answered the question: “How does trauma influence memory?” by explaining that trauma can either be repressed or vivid, and that traumatic memory is stored differently compared to ‘regular’ memory. Traumatic memory can sometimes become part of regular memory by sharing that trauma with a committed witness.

In the second chapter, *Comparing Holocaust survivors and North Korean defectors*, I have provided a short history regarding the genre of Holocaust survivor memoirs and North Korean defector memoirs. In comparing Holocaust memoirs and defector memoirs, I have stressed some differences as well as similarities. Similarities being; their experiences regarding immigration and their memory being affected by PTSD. Differences being; how North Korean defectors were provided a certain framework while growing up and how the Time Difference for Holocaust survivors is much larger.

In the third chapter, *Four case studies of North Korean defector memoirs*, I reviewed six basic factors of influence regarding the creation of the four case studies. I have concluded that the main reason for writing these memoirs is, because they want the suffering of the North Korean people to end. These defectors consider themselves human rights activists and often work with an NGO’s. Similar to Holocaust memoirs, North Korean defector memoirs are also bound on ‘witnessing’, as opposed to use these memoirs to deal with their trauma.

In the fourth chapter, *Common story elements*, I discussed both common and uncommon story elements within in the four case studies and explained how defector memoirs have become a genre of its own. The main emphasis of these memoirs is on survival and what had to be done to survive, which is comparable to what we have seen in Holocaust writing. The most common story elements are: famine and poverty, the act of defecting and cultural assimilation.

In the final chapter, *Traumatic story elements*, I answered the question: “How is trauma visible in North Korean defector memoirs?” by looking at specific quotes regarding six traumatic story elements. It is through these six story elements, that trauma is, to a certain extent, visible within the four case studies. While the term ‘trauma’ is often not mentioned in these

memoirs, that does not mean their experiences cannot be considered traumatic. Things that might be considered traumatic to ‘outsiders’, were discussed as normalities, meaning that such horrors were included in the defector’s framework. This also provides an explanation as to why the act of defecting and cultural acclimatization to life in South Korea (or America) were seemingly more traumatic. There is a difference regarding the experiences of male and female defectors, which in return creates a difference in trauma.

In general, the four defectors shared their stories a few times prior to writing their memoir, which could lead to the traumatic memory integrating into regular memory. As a result, this would also have influenced how their memoir is written. All memoirs have added knowledge in hindsight, which the defectors did not have at the time of the event, showing how past memories can be influenced by knowledge in hindsight; with the original memory having been altered by the availability of new information.

In summary, the understanding that trauma theory can provide us regarding North Korean defector memoirs, is a possible explanation as to why North Korean defector stories change within their retellings, as well as insight in the complexity of their memories. Some of their traumatic memories might be repressed, while others are very vivid. Over time, perhaps with the help of a committed listener or through the process of writing a memoir, traumatic memories might become part of their regular memory, changing the balance of their general narrative and therefore their story.

In completing this study, I have only added a tiny sliver of information to the debate regarding North Korean defector memoirs. There are still many ways to add to the current debate. In my study I briefly mentioned the (possible) influence of co-writers on these memoirs. More in-depth research regarding this and other factors of influence, could help us get a better understanding of North Korean defector memoirs.

Finally, as discussed in the first chapter, there is the question whether trauma can be transferred from a first to second generation survivor. Studying the transference of trauma from first to second generation North Korean defectors, as well as general transference of trauma to ‘listeners’ could also provide interesting insights regarding North Korean defectors.

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## Appendix A: English North Korean defector memoirs<sup>127</sup>

	YoP	YoE	TD*	Title	Author(s)
1	1996	1994	2	Eyes of the Tailless Animals: Prison Memoirs of a North Korean Woman**	Lee, Soon Ok
2	2000	1992	8	Aquariums of Pyongyang: 10 Years in the North Korean Gulag***	Kang, Chol-hwan and Pierre Rigoulot
3	2004	1998	6	This Is Paradise! My North Korean Childhood****	Kang, Hyok and Philippe Grangereau
4	2009	1999	10	Long Road Home: Testimony of a North Korean Camp Survivor	Kim, Yong and Suk-Young Kim
5	2012	1998	14	A Thousand Miles to Freedom: My Escape from North Korea*****	Kim, Eunsun and Sébastien Falletti
6	2014	2004	10	Dear Leader: My Escape from North Korea*****	Jang, Jin-sung
7	2014	1998	16	Stars Between the Sun and Moon: One Woman's Life in North Korea and Escape to Freedom	Jang, Lucia and Susan McClelland
8	2015	2007	8	In Order to Live: A North Korean Girl's Journey to Freedom	Park, Yeonmi and Maryanne Vollers
9	2015	1997	18	The Girl with Seven Names: A North Korean Defector's Story	Lee, Hyeonseo and David John
10	2015	2006	9	Under the Same Sky: From Starvation in North Korea to Salvation in America	Kim, Joseph and Stephan Talty
11	2016	2002	14	Every Falling Star: The True Story of How I Survived and Escaped North Korea	Lee, Sungju and Susan McClelland

\*Time Difference (TD) between Year of Publication (YoP) and Year of Escape (YoE) from North Korea.

\*\*First published in Korean in 1996. English edition is from 1999.

\*\*\*First published in French in 2000. English edition is from 2001.

\*\*\*\*First published in French in 2004. English edition is from 2005.

\*\*\*\*\*First published in French in 2012. English edition is from 2015.

\*\*\*\*\*First published in Korean in 2014. English edition is also from 2014.

<sup>127</sup> Ordered by Year of Publication and title, excluding previous publications in different languages.

Disclaimer: the construction of this table is my own. Although I have constructed this table for my MA thesis, I have included a similar version to this table in my essay "Memoirs of North Korea," for the class on Human Rights Discourses on North Korea.

## Appendix B: Age of experience<sup>128</sup>

### Eunsun Kim

Life event	Year	Age
Born	1986	-
Escape from North Korea	1998	11
Second escape from NK	2002	15
Escape to Mongolia	2006	19
Arrival in South Korea	2006	20
Date of publication *	2012	25

\*First edition in French published in 2012

\*\*In relation to the first date of publication

Time spent in	Years
North Korea	11
China	8
Mongolia (months)	4
South Korea**	6

Time difference**	Years
Escape from North Korea	14
Escape to Mongolia	6

### Yeonmi Park

Life event	Year	Age
Born	1993	-
Escape from North Korea	2007	13
Escape to Mongolia	2009	15
Arrival in South Korea	2009	15
Date of publication	2015	21

\*In relation to the first date of publication

Time spent in	Years
North Korea	13
China	2
Mongolia (months)	2
South Korea*	6

Time difference*	Years
Escape from North Korea	8
Escape to Mongolia	6

### Hyeonseo Lee

Life event	Year	Age
Born	1980	-
Escape from North Korea	1997	17
Arrival in South Korea	2008	28
Date of publication	2015	35

\*In relation to the first date of publication

Time spent in	Years
North Korea	17
China	11
South Korea*	7

Time difference*	Years
Escape from North Korea	18

### Joseph Kim

Life event	Year	Age
Born	1990	-
Escape from North Korea	2006	15
Arrival in U.S.	2007	16
Date of publication	2015	24*

\*When writing the epilogue

\*\*In relation to the first date of publication

Time spent in	Years
North Korea	15
China	1
The U.S.**	7

Time difference**	Years
Escape from North Korea	9

<sup>128</sup> Some dates or ages above are estimates as defectors do not always include age and/or date when talking about certain events. Using the dates and ages that were included as a baseline, I was able to deduct most information.



## Appendix C: Traumatic story elements

### 1. Public execution

Defector	Quote	Reference
Eunsun	“Through the plume of smoke that was dissipating into the air, I could make out gigantic puddles of blood, littered with pieces of flesh mixed with a white liquid.”	Kim and Falletti, <i>Thousand Miles</i> , 114.
	“After this first terrible ordeal, I became used to these public executions, which were a routine occurrence.”	Kim and Falletti, <i>Thousand Miles</i> , 115.
Yeonmi	“Three men with rifles stood in front of him and begin firing. The executioners tried to cut the ropes with bullets and it took a long time. Finally, they succeeded, and the dead man flopped to the ground.”	Park and Vollers, <i>Order to Live</i> , 51.
	“It was the most terrible sight I have ever seen. The first thing the rats eat are the eyes, because that is the softest part of a body. I can still see those hollow red eyes. They come to me in my nightmares and I wake up screaming.”	Park and Vollers, <i>Order to Live</i> , 112-113.
	“The frozen babies that starving mothers abandoned in the alleys did not fit into my worldview, so I couldn’t process what I saw. It was normal to see bodies in the trash heaps, bodies floating in the river, normal to just walk by and do nothing when a stranger cried for help.”	Park and Vollers, <i>Order to Live</i> , 54.
Hyeonseo	“The most random detail stuck in my mind. I remember how the man standing next to me lit a cigarette and held it down by his side so that the smoke gathered foggily in his fingers. There was no breeze. Suddenly it seemed like there was no air to breathe. I had to get out of there. I almost fought my way out.”	Lee and David, <i>Seven Names</i> , 27.
	“Next to the hole of the squat toilet was a bloodied white plastic bag. Inside was a dead baby with a tiny blue-pink face. The mother must have given birth there and fled. The umbilical cord and the placenta lay next to it. I was shocked to the core and didn’t sleep that night.”	Lee and David, <i>Seven Names</i> , 76.
Joseph	“One day, I saw a man carrying a corpse on his back, a corpse that had apparently come off a passing train. It wasn’t like the other bodies I’d seen before. The top half, including the head, was burned to a blackened crisp.”	Kim and Talty, <i>Same Sky</i> , 31.

## 2. Famine and poverty

Defector	Quote	Reference
Eunsun	“There was no more heating, either, but I hardly felt the cold at all, because I was completely exhausted after several days without eating. I was sure that I was about to die of hunger.”	Kim and Falletti, <i>Thousand Miles</i> , 2.
Yeonmi	“It’s still painful to think about that time. That’s all any of us wanted: just to eat.”	Park and Vollers, <i>Order to Live</i> , 116.
Hyeonseo	“They were pale and skeletal, and dressed in rags.”	Lee and David, <i>Seven Names</i> , 80.
Joseph	“I didn’t feel human anymore. A human being has many thoughts running through his mind, many emotions, some happy, some sad. The wandering sparrow has only one thought –food- and one emotion, which can be summed up as <i>I don’t want to die.</i> ”	Kim and Talty, <i>Same Sky</i> , 130.
	“I felt my stomach do a flip. “Cousin,” she said, “what shape were the fat bubbles?” My tongue felt covered in greasy fur. Had I eaten a human being? If I did, I was now a cannibal.”	Kim and Talty, <i>Same Sky</i> , 46.

## 3. Detention centre and prison camp

Defector	Quote	Reference
Eunsun	“I was completely naked and being subjected to humiliating torment. I bent my knees, crouched down, and then got back up again. I did this repeatedly until I was out of breath. Nothing was to be hidden, not even the most intimate areas of our bodies. After making her way through this group of naked women, a female officer in uniform grabbed me extremely hard. She shone a flashlight in my ears and then in my mouth. She inspected my teeth and then reached behind my gums. She dragged her hand down my chest. I started to shudder. Then her hand reached my stomach. She didn’t stop there: a little farther down and she continued to search my body by pushing her fingers inside me. I clenched my jaw. Everything had to be removed, even tampons.”	Kim and Falletti, <i>Thousand Miles</i> , 111-112.
Joseph	“Even though I’d been homeless for more than two years by then, and had dealt with gangsters and starvation, the place terrified me. The day before, I’d seen a teenager beaten so severely I was sure he was brain-damaged, and darkness had brought the shrieks of girls being raped in the next room.”	Kim and Talty, <i>Same Sky</i> , vii.

#### 4. The act of defecting

Defector	Quote	Reference
Eunsun	“My anxiety started to build. I remembered our previous failure. What if this time the soldiers shot us down?”	Kim and Falletti, <i>Thousand Miles</i> , 70.
	“I imagined a border guard appearing at any moment and shooting at us. We only had about a hundred meters to cross, but it felt like an eternity.”	Kim and Falletti, <i>Thousand Miles</i> , 71.
Yeonmi	“I was so scared I was completely paralyzed.” P2	Park and Vollers, <i>Order to Live</i> , 2.
Hyeonseo	“I felt a wave of terror. After just an hour, the pilot announced the beginning of the descent. Minutes later we were flying over Seoul and Incheon. My heart was racing. I was excited, and very frightened.”	Lee and David, <i>Seven Names</i> , 193.
Joseph	“I was shaking with fear but making good progress.”	Kim and Talty, <i>Same Sky</i> , 208.

#### 5. Rape and human trafficking

Defector	Quote	Reference
Eunsun	“Many other women who escape from North Korea face an even worse fate: forced prostitution in brothels and karaoke lounges. This also includes their children, even if the children are very young. These victims are scarred for life, and many feel ashamed of their past.	Kim and Falletti, <i>Thousand Miles</i> , 107.
Yeonmi	“I was so scared, and the act was so painful and disgusting and violent that I thought it couldn’t really be happening to me. After a while I actually felt like I had left my body and was sitting on the floor next to the bed.”	Park and Vollers, <i>Order to Live</i> , 146.
Hyeonseo	“ <i>Please no</i> . Until this moment I’d been in that strange calm emergency mode I’d been in at the Xita Road Police Station, keeping my fear under control, as if I wasn’t quite there. Now I was losing it. My breathing became shallow. My body began trembling and refused to stop.”	Lee and David, <i>Seven Names</i> , 152.

## 6. Cultural acclimatization

Defector	Quote	Reference
Eunsun	“It seems absurd and ungrateful, but all of a sudden, after making it all the way to South Korea and obtaining the papers that we never imagined we’d receive, after the sheer joy of this day when we had finally and totally escaped from our life of hiding, after being welcomed and housed in this new country, I was overcome by an immense feeling of sadness. It was as if everything, all the burdens and hardships of the past nine years, came back to me at that moment.”	Kim and Falletti, <i>Thousand Miles</i> , 185.
Yeonmi	“In North Korea, we don’t have words for “depression” or “posttraumatic stress,” so I had no idea what those things were or whether I might be suffering because of them.”	Park and Vollers, <i>Order to Live</i> , 219.
Hyeonseo	“Some suffered breakdowns, or panic attacks at the thought of the super-competitive job market they were about to enter.”	Lee and David, <i>Seven Names</i> , 209.
Joseph	“I felt scared and lonely and lost.”	Kim and Talty, <i>Same Sky</i> , 259.