

A Grain of Rice Is Greater than the Earth

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Photo date and location unknown

Everyone grew thin under the pressure of hard labor. I was the exception. I was able to maintain my weight at 159 pounds, making me an object of envy for the other prisoners. I always excelled in physical strength. On one occasion, though, I became extremely ill with a symptom similar to tuberculosis. I had these symptoms for nearly a month. However, I did not miss even a day of work at the factory. I knew that if I were absent other prisoners would be held responsible for my share of the work. People called me, "The man like a steel rod" because of my strength. I could endure even the most difficult work. Prison and compulsory labor were not such a big problem for me. No matter how fierce the beating or terrible the environment, a person can endure if he carries a definite purpose in his heart.

Prisoners were also exposed to sulfuric acid, which was used in the manufacture of ammonium sulfate. When I worked at the Kawasaki steel mill in Japan I witnessed several instances in which a person cleaning vats used to store sulfuric acid had died from the effects of acid poisoning. The situation in Hungnam was far worse. Exposure to sulfuric acid was so harmful that it would cause hair loss and sores on our skin that oozed liquid. Most people who worked in the factory would begin vomiting blood and die after about six months. We would wear rubber pieces on our fingers for protection, but the acid would quickly wear through these. The acid fumes would also eat through our clothing, making them useless, and our skin would break and bleed. In some cases, the bones would become visible. We had to continue working without so much as a day's rest, even when our sores were bleeding and oozing pus.

Our meal rations consisted of less rice than it took to fill two small bowls. There were no side dishes, but

we were given a soup that was radish greens in saltwater. The soup was so salty it made our throats burn, but the rice was so hard we couldn't eat it without washing it down with the soup. No one ever left even a single drop of the soup. When we received our bowl of rice, prisoners would put all the rice into their mouths at once. Having eaten their own rice, they would look around, stretching their necks sometimes to watch how the others ate. Sometimes someone would put his spoon in someone else's soup bowl, and there would be a fight. One minister who was with me in Hungnam once said to me, "Let me have just one bean and I will give you two cows after we get out of here." People were so desperate that if a prisoner died at mealtime, the others would dig out any rice still in his mouth and eat it themselves.

The pain of hunger can only be known by those who have experienced it. When a person is hungry, a mere grain of rice becomes very precious. Even now, it makes me tense just to think of Hungnam. It's hard to believe that a single grain of rice can give such stimulation to the body, but to a hungry person a grain of rice is bigger than the earth. A grain of rice takes on enormous value to someone who is hungry.

Beginning with my first day in prison I made a habit to take half of my ration of rice and give it to my fellow prisoners, keeping only half for myself. I trained myself that way for three weeks and then ate the whole ration. This made it easier to endure the hunger.

Prison life is so terrible that it cannot even be imagined by someone who has not experienced it. Half the prisoners would die within a year, so every day we had to watch as dead bodies were carried out the back gate in a wooden box. We would work so hard, and our only hope for leaving was as a dead body in that wooden casket. Even for a merciless and cruel regime, what they did to us clearly went beyond all boundaries of humanity. All those bags of fertilizer filled with the tears and grief of the prisoners were loaded onto ships and taken to Russia.