

Hyeon-Jeong KIM: 50 days of confinement for forced de-conversion (1)

Presbyterian pastors inciting domestic violence and breaches of Korean laws

By Willy Fautré, Director of Human Rights Without Frontiers

HRWF (22.08.2019) - Hyeon-Jeong KIM, the victim of kidnapping and confinement for the purpose of religious de-conversion, was born in 1989. Her parents, Sung-Jo Kim and Eun-Su Kim, are Presbyterians and raised their children in the Presbyterian Church. Her father is a retired teacher and her mother is a housewife. They were living together in Daegu, the fourth largest city of Korea, at the time of the incidents. In 2015, at the age of 27 (1), Hyeon-Jeong Kim started attending the religious services of the Shincheonji Church (2).

Interview of Hyeon-Jeong Kim



Q: How did your parents know about your interest in the Shincheonji Church and how did they react?

A: They heard from one of my friends. They were quite opposed and put me under strict surveillance. They also contacted Presbyterian pastors to ask them what to do. Knowing that my father could be violent, I told him I would not go to that Church any more. I was a pharmacy student at the time and so I managed to continue attending their meetings secretly for the next three years.

Last year (2018), I got a job in a pharmacy, but my parents found out that I had not severed my relations with the Shincheonji Church. On 8 April, during dinner, my father had an angry outburst about my change of religion. I didn't say anything because I did not want to further inflame the situation. During this incident my father tried to hit me with a glass container and my mother held me by the neck while my brother also tried to hit me. This family crisis lasted for two hours.

In the aftermath of that fateful day, my parents did some research on the internet about the Shincheonji Church. They only found negative papers posted by the Presbyterian Church and media influenced by the Presbyterian Church. After that, they took my phone away and my father followed me to and from work every day as if I were a child. I was 30 years old at the time. In the meantime, they had been told by Presbyterian pastors to show me films and articles denouncing the Shincheonji Church as a heretic Christian movement. After work, I wasn't allowed to leave the house and was denied access to my cell phone. I had to watch and read Presbyterian propaganda against the Shincheonji Church every day. My brother, who was married and was not living with us, was also taking sides with my parents and was threatening me.

Q. Did you try to get assistance from outside?

A. There was a police station near the pharmacy with a Women and Youth department counseling center. I thought I could get some help from them. However, due to the close surveillance of my father, I could only go to the police at lunch time. I did so and told them everything, including the reasons behind the domestic violence I was experiencing. The police response was catastrophic. They called my father and told him to give me back my phone and to put an end to my surveillance. My action further fueled his anger towards me.

At the pharmacy, I told my boss and my colleagues that I feared I was at risk of being abducted and confined by my family because of my change of religion.

Q. And were you abducted?

A. Yes. A few weeks later, on 27 April. My phone had 'disappeared', but I knew they had taken it away. I was very angry and I threatened to call the police on my father. I told my mother I would leave for work earlier and have breakfast in a nearby shop. She thought I was planning to run away from home forever and ran after me. My father caught me and forced me into his car. As I was screaming, passers-by tried to help, but my father told them I was *his* daughter and he was saving me from a heretic religious movement. He informed our family that he was taking me to my aunt's, Kyung-Hee KIM. It was approximately a 15-minute drive. This is how my kidnapping and confinement started.

Q. Had the abduction been planned as an option in the minds of your parents?

A. Without any doubt, but not only in their minds. At my aunt's place, about 15 minutes away, we were joined by my mother and brother. I was deprived of all my possessions, tied up and transferred to a faraway place: Hae-woon-dae, Busan. It took two hours by car. I was pushed into a studio on the 7th floor of a building.

My family had made this plan based on recommendations from the Presbyterian pastors. This option had been partially prepared and partially improvised as no date had been fixed. The renting contract of the studio was signed at the last moment, a day before the abduction, by my mom and my aunt.

I was locked in a room with closed curtains for 50 days under the surveillance of both my parents and my aunt. They threatened that I would never be able to leave if I did not agree to enter a de-conversion program. Members of my brother's family who visited us on weekends cursed at me and threatened me as well. One day, my father tried to strangle me because I was still refusing to give up my faith. My mom and my aunt

stopped him just in time. Otherwise, I would have been killed in the same way as another woman a few months earlier: Ji-in Gu (25 years old).

After about a month of staying at the studio apartment, my aunt went back to Daegu and the rest of the family remained with me. I started suffering from claustrophobia.

Q. The Presbyterian deprogrammers do not appear anywhere during your captivity? How do you explain that?

A: During the 50 days that I spent in captivity, no de-conversion pastor showed up because they do not want to be accused of complicity in a case of abduction and confinement for the purpose of forced change of religion, which is illegal in South Korea. However, they were in regular contact with my family and gave them instructions about how to force me to return to the Presbyterian faith. Of course, I do not have any records of their telephone conversations, but whenever I clashed with my parents, one of them would leave the room to make a phone call. So, I am assuming that they were receiving instructions on how to act in such situations.

For more than seven weeks I resisted the psychological pressure and the threats of my family and their Presbyterian advisers. I was alone against all of them, without any help or support, but I won my battle for my faith. I continued refusing to sign any agreement stating that I was freely asking to be de-converted in the framework of a so-called "conversion counseling program".

Since my parents saw no solution in sight, some people from the Suyongro Presbyterian Church in Busan were sent to the apartment. This gave me the opportunity to attempt to escape. I was unsuccessful but was able to leave the apartment long enough to call for help. When I tried to escape that day, my family *and* the three envoys from the Presbyterian Suyongro Church dragged me back into the apartment. These three envoys were directly participating in my sequestration. Their names are **Cho Hana** and **Choo Jin Wook**, both evangelists of the Presbyterian Suyongro Church, and an unknown woman.

Q. How did you manage to recover your freedom?

A: On 16 June, the 51st day of my confinement, a combination of circumstances gave me an opportunity to run away. I was cleaning the bathroom when someone rang the front doorbell. My father started to remove the water bottles that were stacked at the front door to let the three people mentioned above into the apartment. When my father opened the door, I rushed out, barefoot and calling for help. However, I was on the 7th floor and so my parents were able to catch me. I was brought back into the apartment and the three visitors came inside for my de-conversion program.

I continued to scream and refuse anything they tried to force me to do. One of the neighbours came to our door and asked what was happening. I said, "Please call the police!" and my father closed the door again. That neighbor did call the police.

When the police came, they took everybody to the police station. My mother, my father and myself were in the same car and two of the deprogrammers - **Cho Hana** and **Choo Ji Wook** - were in another police car. My brother was in Busan and came to the police station an hour later after my parents called him. All I wanted was to be separated from my family.

After several hours of discussion, the police brought me to a women's emergency shelter in Busan despite the opposition of my family. Not long afterwards, my brother managed to find my safe place and so, for my own security, I had to move to another shelter in Daegu. The police followed my case and I thank them for that.

Q. What happened at the police station?

A. The police checked the identity of the persons to be heard and asked me why I was held in the apartment.

I said that during 50 days my family had tried to force me to leave the Shincheonji Church, because they believed it was a cult, and to go back to the Presbyterian Church. To this end, they wanted me to follow a religious reeducation program run by the Presbyterian Church and to sign an agreement saying it was my personal decision. But I kept refusing because it was not my choice and they kept me in confinement.

A policeman took me to another room and said that what my family did was a crime. Additionally, since the victim – myself - wanted to be separated from the perpetrators, they have to abide by the victim's wishes and provide a safe place.

The members of the Presbyterian Church in Busan - **Cho Hana** and **Choo Ji Wook** - emphasized that they were just normal believers and started to slander the Shincheonji Church. They also cursed and slandered me, and took sides with my family, saying I should go to a 'normal church'.

The police listened to the slanders and accusations and did not make any comment.

Q. Could you get your position back at the pharmacy after almost two months of absence?

A. On the day of my abduction, my boss from the pharmacy received a call from my maternal uncle. He said that they were with me at a restaurant in Kyunggi-do (Kyunggi province) and that we were in the midst of a family trip, and then he immediately hung up.

Because of what I had told my boss about my family problems and risk of abduction, he filed a missing person's report with the police.

Fortunately, I could get my job back.

Q. How are your relations with your family now?

A. When I was at the women's shelter in Daegu, my father sent me a letter saying that I could return home and he would respect my religious choice. The local police, who had been informed of my situation by my boss, escorted me home. Now, I am living with my family again. I said I would live with them as long as they respect my religious choice. I feel better, but the trauma has not disappeared. (End of the interview).

WANTED



Cho Ha-Nnah Choo Jin-Wook

The three deprogrammers from the Presbyterian Suyongro Church who showed up at the place of detention of Hyeon-Jeong Kim were aware that she was sequestered by family members. When she tried to escape, they decided not only to deny assistance to a person in danger, but also to become accomplices of the prolongation of her confinement. Abduction and confinement of Hyeon-Jeong Kim for the purpose of forced change of religion are illegal and criminal activities in South Korea. The family members were prosecuted but not those who helped them to reincarcerate Hyeon-Jeong. (3)

- **Cho Ha-Na** is a member of the Sooyoungro Church. She is a de-conversion counselor and directly consults with family members who come to the church for the coercive conversion program.

- **Choo Jin-Wook** is a member of the Sooyoungro Church. He is a de-conversion counselor and directly consults with family members who come to the church for the coercive de-conversion program).

- **Unknown woman** is a member of the Sooyoungro Church.

1. In South Korea, a baby is considered to be one year old on the very first day of his/her birth.
2. Shincheonji Church of Jesus Temple of the Tabernacle of Testimony (Shincheonji in short) is one of the largest Korean Christian new religious movements. The Church was founded in 1984 in South Korea by Chairman Man Hee Lee and currently has more than 200,000 members in 29 countries.

Shincheonji teaches that it is the promised church in the Bible, pledged to appear in the times of the fulfillment of Revelation prophecies. It also teaches that, in this special time when the prophecies are fulfilled, the messenger of Jesus, i.e. Chairman Man Hee Lee, starts a new religious world to spread the gospel of the fulfillment of Revelation and to heal the nations. Because of its original theology and rapid growth, the Church has encountered the hostility of traditional Christian denominations.

3. The details and the analysis of the prosecution will be the main theme of the next report about this case.