



The North Koreans in the Czech Republic: The Silent Workers

Marie Jelínková

“They are so quiet you would hardly know they are here,” says Zdenek Belohlavek, Labour Office director for the district of Beroun. Their neighbours, the local employment office and their employers – in fact, everyone - speaks only in a positive way about the North Korean workers. They live in the Czech Republic, but it is rare you will encounter them. If you are lucky enough you might see them jogging or walking with their guard. They work eight and half hours a day like their Moldavian or Ukrainian colleagues, but you cannot meet them shopping; they do not receive any salary.

Three hundred and twenty North Korean women live in the Czech Republic, thousands of kilometres away from their home. Can they learn what is normal and what is not in this country during their three to five year stay? The North Koreans in the CR are mainly seamstresses who comply with all legal requirements and received work permits. They get a minimal wage for very hard work. Can we argue against it? At first glance, no. They do not break the law in any obvious manner. Women work to perfection; a Czech employer could only dream of such well organised labour. But do we know how they really live?

There is no escape for them

We decided to find out what the situation is really like with a colleague who was writing a story for *The Los Angeles Times*. However, we soon realised that to meet the North Korean workers was extremely difficult. The girls spend most of their time locked up. They go outside with their guard and if they go without him they watch each other the whole time. After some time we were lucky enough to talk with them in an old schoolhouse in Zelezná, which is now a factory producing work uniforms. Surprisingly, we were allowed in and we waited in the hall for the factory owner Jiri Balaban. While waiting a group of five Korean

girls came towards us and we stopped them. My colleague Barbara Demick, who can speak Korean, tried to communicate with them. She told them that she visited the capital of North Korea Pyongyang a month ago. She also told them that she saw Kim Jong Il himself at a physical training festival, which was similar to our spartakiades. The expression of the girls changed and the youngest of them started to clap her hands. Immediately they had many questions and it was not easy to change the topic. Some of them learned a couple of Czech words from their Ukrainian colleagues. Thus I could ask them if they liked it here. A young girl in a pink T-shirt volunteered to say “No, I am not.” “Why not?”, I asked her. “I would rather be home. Here it is...” But as she spoke, a slightly older woman with an expressionless face passed by in the corridor. The young women scattered wordlessly and disappeared into another room. She walked passed us and closed the door. The silence spoke for itself.

Most of these women employed in the Czech Republic are between eighteen and twenty two years old. They usually come from families deemed sufficiently loyal to the regime in North Korea, a country where a bowl of white rice is a luxury. It is possible that these families view it as a privilege to work abroad; however, we would regard the work conditions and the work which the girls do as punishment. It is difficult to know what the girls really think. The only way to find out seems to be luckily meeting them unexpectedly as we did. The Koreans are usually housed behind locked doors and no stranger can get in. Even their deliveryman must leave supplies in front of the locked doors. Only the girls, their guards and the supervisors can enter the premises. They go to work two abreast and they have very limited possible places in which to spend their free time. In theory, they could escape, although it appears that their guards are not really worried about it. In Zbrak the people have already realised that the girls will not escape and will not communicate with other people. Therefore they are allowed go to the local supermarket or even for a short trip in groups. Besides, where would these girls go? They usually know only how to say *hello* in Czech; only few of them have learned basic vocabulary. Even if they were to defect and then found a job, their families in Korea would lose their privileges and might be deported from Pyongyang. Today the North Korean regime no longer sends family members of defectors to work camps as often as it used to in the past. Nowadays these people are “only” deported to areas where there is not much chance of survival – usually it is a question of a few weeks or months.

Everything is all right

The situation of these girls in the Czech Republic has changed slightly since the Czech weekly paper *Respekt* opened the issue two years ago. Consequently, the factories which employ North Koreans were frequently inspected but almost no criminal offences were found. The factories appeared to fully comply with the law. Only one of them was advised to increase the minimum wage and one employee lost her work permit because she did a different job than she was permitted to do. The most important result was a short discussion about this modern kind of slavery. Some Czech politicians declared their regrets. Since everything was within the law there were no reasons found to insist on a change. Cyril Svoboda even said that “I personally believe that these women can learn some democratic rules and use them after they get back to North Korea.” Unfortunately he did not elaborate how they could learn more about democracy whilst living behind locked doors. Vaclav Havel was the only politician who openly expressed disagreement with the modern slavery of North Korean citizens in CR. “The North Koreans should be prevented from earning money here to support their regime”, he said two years ago and adheres to it today.

Moral or only legal?

The highest number of North Korean workers is in central Bohemia but dozens of them also work in Nachod. We travelled to Nachod, where they sew handbags and bags. “You know we have here Ukrainians, Moldavians, Vietnamese and others, but Koreans are different”, said the janitor Antonin Janicek. “The other women go clubbing or to the cinema but the Korean girls do not go anywhere,” he added. We wanted to meet the North Korean guard of the women in Nachod but attempted with no success. We phoned him but his answer was definite: “It is no one’s business why the girls are here, what they do and how they are.” This answer is given from the man who organises all aspects of the girls’ lives, which consists of going to work and then back to a constantly locked dormitory, which no one can visit. He also does their shopping. It is he who mediates all their communication with the rest of the world and who - if necessary - also translates. The girls can do nothing against his will. So the girls suffer from a literal observation of the law which our state permits.

No doubt money is the main reason for exploiting these seamstresses. North Korea services its debt by labour of its people. There are ten thousand North Korean workers in eastern Russia working on behalf of their government in a position of near-slavery. But North Korea does not pay back any debt this way to the CR. The earnings of these seamstresses go somewhere else. Their homeland only provides a little money for its embassies. It is usually

up to employees to cover their expenses. It is also estimated that the North Korean government keeps most of its sources of hard currency (experts say up to 90 per cent) for its isolated and impoverished regime, which lives off counterfeiting, drug trafficking and weapons sales. It is not surprising then that, for example, the salaries of needlewomen in Kreateda (in Zebra) are deposited directly in the account of their supervisors. If they get anything it is a fraction of the money earned, perhaps used to buy something sweet. The only shop they go to is the local supermarket. What would they do in other shops?

It appears that everything is correct and proper according to law. But is it politically acceptable? The North Korean girls in the Czech Republic live in much better conditions than their peers in Korea, as far as standards of living are concerned. But do we agree with the opinion of our politicians, that they can learn democracy here? Maybe they learn something about capitalism. Their employers do not want to lose this very good and very cheap labour force. Jiri Balaban, the owner of the Zelezna factory and the employer of approximately fifteen North Korean women said: "It's not my business what the girls do in their free time. My business is that they work." I asked the commissioner for human rights, Svatopluk Karasek, to investigate this issue. Unfortunately I have been waiting for a reaction for more than two months. The reaction of consumers in Western Europe was more effective in dealing with this situation. Exporters and importers were worried about the reaction of their clients. Nor did they want to support this modern kind of slavery and the North Korean dictator Kim Jong Il. For example the shoe company SAM decided it would no longer employ North Koreans, after the fact that North Koreans work for them was published. They had to take into account the reaction of their customers.