**Headline: A Former Sex Slave Still Fights for Justice at Age 94** (769 words)

**Sub headline: 'Everyone, what can we do for a sincere apology?'**

By Lisa Kim

Just before noon on March 24, a van carrying a 94-year-old woman rolled into Jongno, a northern Seoul neighborhood where tidy high-rise office buildings meet historic landmarks. She was sitting in the back seat and her eyes lit up when an activist opened the van door.

She had been cooped up in her nursing home for about a year due to COVID-19. The virus threatened to take away her motivation in life: to tell her story until justice is served.

But she did not lose her motivation. A worker from the woman’s nursing home pushed her wheelchair to the center of a group of around 20 people — far fewer than would have been there if no COVID restrictions were in place.

Moments of silence passed as she gathered her thoughts. “Halmoni, why don’t you start with your usual opening?” whispered the man who pushed her wheelchair, using the Korean word for “Grandma.” “Your usual, ‘Hello, I’m survivor Lee Ok-sun.’”

Lee, 94, was trafficked into sexual enslavement by the Japanese military during World War II. She was 16 years old. She has testified repeatedly about her experience since she broke her silence more than two decades ago.

“They hit the young girls and me when we refused,” Lee said at this weekly protest that seeks justice for survivors of Japanese military sexual slavery. When she resisted, Japanese soldiers slit her dress, cutting her as well, she told the group, her shaky voice rising. Blood ran down her abdomen. But that didn’t stop them from raping her, she said, her voice breaking. “If they didn’t take us against our will, why were we taken away by force?”

Lee has asked that question over and over again in Korea and around the world, seeking an apology from her perpetrators. For years, she has joined other survivors, activists and supporters who have been gathering outside the Japanese Embassy in northern Seoul every Wednesday at noon since January 1992.

This July 15th marked the 1,500th day of protest — formally called the Wednesday Demonstration. In its nearly three decades, the protest has been cancelled just once, to respect Japan’s 1995 Kobe earthquake.

Lee fractured her jaw when she was held prisoner, so she has difficulty speaking clearly. Her vision, hearing and legs were impaired, too. She is opposed to the term “comfort women” or “comfort station,” which was coined by Japanese occupiers of Korea. She calls the place she was held a “death room.”

Lee is one of the [approximately 200,000 girls](https://kls.law.columbia.edu/content/military-sexual-slavery-1931-1945), mostly from Korea, who were forced to do household chores by day, and then to sexually service soldiers at night. On weekends, Lee said she would see around 50 soldiers.

Only 14 survivors registered with the Korean government are still alive. All of them are in their 80s and 90s. The women, who were trafficked as teenagers, bear the burden of what the [U.N. Commission on Human Rights](http://hrlibrary.umn.edu/commission/country52/53-add1.htm) has called “a crime against humanity, a gross violation of international humanitarian law, a crime against peace and a crime of slavery, trafficking in persons and of forced prostitution.”

Like other survivors, Lee is fighting on behalf of those who died without seeing justice. Japan’s conservative government, in power since the mid-1990s, has sought to rewrite this dark chapter of their history. It recently approved high school history textbooks that have reduced or omitted the section on wartime sexual enslavement.

Most survivors who returned home after liberation from Japan kept silent about their experiences, even to their families due to the oppressive social norm. Many who shared their past were shunned by their families and communities.

Lee’s faith in Catholicism has been her main source of energy. She starts each day with a televised Mass at 9 a.m. while dipping her feet in warm water.

She had thought her experience as a sex slave made her ineligible to attend Mass. A nun in her village persuaded her that she didn’t do anything wrong and could participate. She hasn’t missed a daily Mass since.

Lee believes God will be at her side until the day Japan makes a sincere and official apology and takes legal responsibility.

It is that belief that led her to testify once again at the 1,484th weekly protest this March. Behind her were yellow butterflies that symbolize the hope that survivors will achieve justice and become free at last from the past.

“The Japanese government is neither reflecting on themselves nor speaking the truth,” she said at the protest, her voice breaking as she shook her left arm back and forth in disbelief. “Everyone, what can we do for a sincere apology?”