CHAPTER 12

# Back to My Wretched Life

**Mun Okchu**

*Mun Okchu was born in 1924 in Taegu. When she was eight years old herfather, who had been involved in the liberation struggle waged against the Japanese occupation, returned home and died from illness. In spite of her family's resultant poverty, her desire to study was so great that she went to Manchuria with relatives who had promised to educate her. She returned home in secret because they only wanted her to do their housework. In 1940, when she was 16, she was kidnapped by a Japanese military policeman on her way home from a friend's house. She was transported to a comfort station in Manchuria and became a comfort woman.*

## Childhood

I was born in spring 1924 in Taemyŏng ward, Taegu city. I have lived in Taegu all my life except for the years when I was a comfort woman. My parents came from the countryside not far from Taegu. We still have some relatives there, but I haven't visited them recently. When I was very young my father used to visit us now and again. When I was eight, he came home for good, but soon became very ill and died. My mother explained his absences from home by saying that he had taken part in the liberation struggle against the Japanese occupation in Shanghai and Manchuria.[1] When he became ill, she said he had come home to die. All I remember about him is that he was an educated man.

There were four of us children, with quite big age gaps between us. I had a brother nine years older than me, and when I was three my younger brother was born. I thought there were only three of us until my father died. Then I learned that I had a big sister who had already

1 A Korean government-in-exile was established in Shanghai during the Japanese occupation of Korea. At one point in the early 1920s, Syngman Rhee, later the leader of the Republic of Korea, was elected president. Communist and guerrilla groups also operated in the 1920s in the mountainous areas of what is now North Korea, and across the border in Manchuria and China. Kim II Sung, later to become president of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, appears to have been a minor guerrilla leader in the 1930s in one such group.





married and left home before I was born. My father gave my mother her address just before he died.

My mother scraped a living by sewing or working in the homes of others. Sometimes, her own family helped by giving us rice. I was said to be a bright child, and I could remember almost everything I saw, but we were too poor for me to be sent for a proper education. I learned by overhearing the lessons in the village boys' school, and I went to evening classes from time to time to learn Chinese characters, Korean and Japanese. I was very eager to study and can still vividly remember how much I wanted to attend school.

When I was about 13, a relative and his wife who were living in Japan — whether they were direcdy related to my mother or my father I still don't know for sure - came to the village for a visit. They asked my mother to let them take me to Japan, and in exchange for light housework they promised to treat me like their own daughter, to send me to school and to find me a good husband. My mother, unhappy at having been unable to educate me, readily gave permission. I left home filled with the hope that I would soon be attending school. They lived in Fukuoka where they ran a second-hand shop and had many men working for them. As soon as we arrived, the wife chopped off my long hair and from then on made me wear a bob. She didn't offer any apologies or any sympathy for cutting my hair, and then started to order me to do the housework. There was no mention of sending me to school, and from then on I had to look after their children, do the washing up, clean the house and do the laundry every day. I must have stayed for about six months. I was angry about the way I was being treated and saved any money I was given for running errands for the second-hand dealers. At the same time I found out from the dealers how to return home. One day, I left without giving any notice. I returned home.

Back in Korea, I went to evening classes and continued learning to read and write. I worked in a factory managed by the Japanese that made slippers. The slippers were made of sedge for hospitals and were very strong. I commuted from home to Taegu and gave every penny of my wages straight to my mother. I felt proud whenever I handed over the money, but the work wasn't regular and I was often laid off and had to stay home. At such times I would go to a hill behind the village. There was a crematorium on the side where the keeper had a daughter, Haruko. She was two years younger than me and, since I often went there, we became good friends. Haruko and her parents were Koreans who had adopted Japanese names. It was her father's job to burn the dead. Just before he put a corpse into the fire, he would always have a ritual with food. I was often able to eat some of the food afterwards.

Food was scarce, but I was able to have enough to fill me whenever I visited Haruko.

In 1940, I was 16. One autumn evening, I left Haruko's, walking home when the sun had almost set and it was getting towards dusk. I had not gone far when a man in a Japanese military uniform, with a red band around his arm and a long sword at his side, approached me. He grabbed me by the arm and muttered something. As we were all afraid of the police in those days, I went with him. He dragged me along without meeting any resistance. He pulled me by the arm for a while and then made me walk before him. I think I was taken to a military police station where I was put with another girl. Without any food, we spent the night on a long bench, first sitting up and then sleeping, the two of us crouched one on each end.

The next morning, the same man took us to the train station where he handed us over to two other men, one a Japanese in civilian clothes and one a Korean. We got on board a train together. The train had a name: *Akachuki.* It kept going north for about two days. From what we overheard as people got on and off we guessed we were passing places such as Andong in Korea, Fengcheng in China, and so on. The men with us were replaced by a single man who spoke Chinese who stayed to the end of the journey. We had no idea who the men were. We wondered if they could be detectives, but there was no way of finding out. They gave us food now and again and one night asked if we fancied something special.

## Manchuria

At dusk we got off at a place called Taoansheng in north-east China. The man with us escorted us to a military truck and left us. There were three men in uniform in the front of the truck, and we were bundled into the back. The truck travelled for a while, passing villages and fields, and stopped in front of a house separated and isolated from everywhere else. As we got down, lots of women came out to greet us. They were Koreans. There was a man and a woman who looked about 35 or 36, and we learned later that they were the proprietors. We had to call the man 'uncle' and the woman 'big sister'.

There seemed to be about 20 women, and although I wondered why there were so many in such a place, I quickly fell asleep from exhaustion. The next morning I asked what kind of place this was. Nobody replied. One woman asked if I had been paid to come and, when I replied I had not seen any money but had been captured and brought here, she looked very sad. I asked what was wrong and she told me this was a comfort station where the soldiers came. I asked what soldiers had to do with us. Exasperated, she said that this was a place where the soldiers came to sleep. I was still puzzled. I was naive, and couldn't see why the soldiers' sleeping place should concern me in any way, nor why the women looked so anguished.

On the third day, the proprietor assigned us each to a room. Each had a mattress, a quilt and two pillows. From then on we had to serve soldiers. This was when I realized why the women had been so anguished. On the day I lost my virginity, everything seemed to black out before my eyes. I wept and wept. Taoansheng was said to be on the border with Russia, and it was extremely cold. The hats and clothes that people wore were all made of fur. My room was one of the many lined up in two rows, and in winter the walls were all covered with ice. There were narrow ditches at the base of each wall so that water from melted ice could flow to the outside.

There were many soldiers. I think we served 20 to 30 every day. It seemed to be the only comfort station in the neighbourhood, and the rank and file and commissioned officers came whenever they had spare time. High-ranking officers came at any time they wished to, but only officers could stay the night. They would sometimes give us money, which was sort of pocket-money. None of them beat us, and none were violent even when drunk. They used condoms, and none of the girls became pregnant while I was there. Not only had we to entertain them, but we also had to make garters for them.

We were to some degree free. The proprietor gave us Korean food prepared with the help of two Chinese cooks. We didn't have any fixed wages, but were given a small amount of money each month. When we received our monthly allowance, we would take a horse-drawn coach to the city and buy clothes and shoes or see films. No one watched over us, but we dared not run away because we simply didn't know where we were or where we could go.

I still remember Kim Kyehwa and Fumiko. There were some women who said they had been comfort women for five or ten years. I already had a Japanese name, Fumihara, but in the station I renamed myself Namiko after a famous actress, Takeoto Namiko. Thinking about her, I remember we used to sing many of the songs that were popular at the time. On the rare occasions when we had something to laugh about in our torturous life, and when we felt lonesome or miserable, we would sing in unison or hum together quietly.

By the time I had become somewhat used to my lot in life I got to know an officer in charge of the provision of military goods. I knew it would be impossible for me to leave the station and return home in a normal way. I thought that if I befriended someone with power among the soldiers I might be able to persuade them to send me home. So I

flirted with this officer. I made him special garters and I put them on him. I bought him something special when we went shopping, I bought groceries and I cooked him fine meals in the kitchen. It was around September, and I had been stuck in the station for about a year. The officer asked me to set up home outside the station. Taking advantage of the opportunity this presented I wove a story: 'When I left home my mother was very ill, almost near death. Before I start to live with you, please let me go and see her. I will return as soon as possible and then, surely, I will live with you.' I pleaded with him and, after having made me promise that I would indeed come back, he got me a travel permit.

## Home

When I left, I still had some of the money given to me by the soldiers. Before going to my home, I got off at Kümch'ön to find my eldest sister. Her address is still vivid in my memory: Naedong, Haam village, Söbuk district, Kümch'ön county, South Hamgyöng province. Her husband's name was Kim Yöngch'an. I bought a few presents near the railway station and took a taxi to their home.

I got out at Naedong, gave my brother-in-law's name to the villagers who were there and asked to be taken to my sister's home. One rushed off to the field where she was working, and soon she ran towards me, waving her hands wildly. She hugged me and began to cry. At first I hesitated, wondering whether she really was my sister, but I found myself hugging her and weeping anyway. Even though we had never seen each other, we were so glad at last to meet. I couldn't bring myself to tell her about my experiences in China, so I said I had come up from Taegu to see her. I enjoyed my time there. I still think blood ties are the only things you can rely on in life. But that was our first and last time together. I stayed with her for about ten days then returned to Taegu. In Taegu I began to do odd jobs.

I made a new friend in the neighbourhood. Early in July 1942, she asked me if I would like to come with her as she was going to begin working in a restaurant for good wages. Since I didn't think I had much of a future in Taegu, I decided to go along with her. She said she would meet me the following day. I left without telling my family and together we took a train to Pusan. All I wanted was to earn money and help my mother financially. At Pusan station, we were met by a man and a woman. Both were Korean. He was called Matsumoto and, as we found out later, he was to be our proprietor. The woman was actually a comfort woman. They took us to a guest-house. There were already about 15 or 16 women, and one of them was Kim Kyehwa, who had been with me in Manchuria. I was both glad and puzzled to see her. I asked what had happened. She said it was her fate and began to cry. We stayed the night. As we left the next day, I noticed the guest-house was called the Kabul Guest-house.

On 10 July 1942, 18 of us boarded a ship at Pusan port. It was part of a navy convoy and six or seven vessels sailed together. The ship we were on steamed at the tail. As I remember it, there seemed to be many women, perhaps 300 or 400, filling the ship. The 18 of us formed one group, and there were numerous similar groups. The ship kept sailing for about two months. Many women suffered from seasickness. I wasn't sick throughout the long journey, maybe because I was so determined to earn money, or perhaps I had very good health. I helped with the cooking for my group, I cleared away the mess they made if they threw up, and I looked after anyone who lost consciousness. When I saw women from other groups, I would ask if they knew where we were going, and everyone replied that we would be working in restaurants. No one seemed to know what our impending fates were to be. We passed Taiwan and Singapore and, after much sickness and trouble, we arrived at Rangoon.

## Burma

As soon as we docked, the anchor was dropped. We were told that this was our destination and that we should disembark, keeping in our groups. As we walked off there were trucks lined up across the yard. We all stood in our groups, and the men who had led us so far stood separately. They seemed to be drawing lots. When this was over, the man in charge of us told us that it had been decided we would go to Mandalay.

After a little while, one of the trucks drove towards us from across the yard and as soon as we were all aboard it moved off. It dropped us in front of a two-storey building in Mandalay, again isolated from the residential area. The man told us to go upstairs. We climbed a wooden staircase and found ourselves in a large hall with rows of cubicles on either side. There were about twelve cubicles in total. The whole house was built from wood and looked a litde run-down. We were to use the area upstairs. There was an office downstairs, where the proprietor lived. We went down to have meals that had been cooked by a Burmese woman.

The following day, about ten soldiers came with a truck-full of timber and began to work on the house. The first floor was renovated. There had originally been twelve small rooms, but as these would not be enough to accommodate all of us, they put up six more cubicles in the centre of the hall. The soldiers finished their work within a day and left. We were each given one cubicle. On the third day, soldiers rushed in, in large groups. I had been prepared to do any sort of hard work when I had left home, but had little thought I would have to repeat my previous life.

I was dismayed. Ours was the only comfort station in Mandalay. If my memory serves me right, the unit we were attached to was called the 8400th Divisional Headquarters in Burma.

Many, many soldiers came. There was a further unit called the Marusa, and the men from there also visited us now and again. One day, a soldier came into my room sobbing. Tears were streaming from his eyes. I asked him what was the matter, and he said that he was a Korean and had been drafted to the Marusa Unit. There were 50 men in the unit, 30 to 40 of whom were Korean. These Koreans brought tickets and condoms just like the Japanese. We started to serve soldiers from around 9.00 a.m., straight after breakfast. Sometimes the men would queue from early in the morning. The rank and file stopped coming at around 4.00 p.m., and then officers would come until 10.00 at night. After that, some officers stayed through the night.

The tickets were actually brown cards with different prices written on them, according to rank. Tickets for the rank and file cost 1.5 yen while non-commissioned officers paid 2 yen and officers 2.5 yen. Only officers could stay overnight, paying 3 or 4 yen for the privilege. All the tickets were handled by the proprietor. We had one big bathroom which we shared. As it was warm, a mattress and a blanket were enough. We wore Western clothes such as blouses and dresses, or Japanese baggy trousers. Our cook prepared meals with rice. Sometimes we had meat soup, but mosdy our soup was made with wild vegetables collected on the hillsides. I continued to use my Japanese family name, Fumihara, but took Yosiko as my first name. I became close to Hondamineo, a man who managed provisions. From my experience in China I knew how useful it could be to befriend such a person, so I made an effort to get close.

I think we stayed about seven or eight months, but the Divisional Headquarters moved to Akyab (Sittwe) and we had to follow. To get there, we used a military truck, then boarded a ship called the *Taihatsu* to cross the dusty, brown sea. The coast was dotted with many islands. As we sailed we had to land on some of the islands to escape shells dropped by American planes. When we landed anywhere, the soldiers stationed there would surround us and welcome us. They would ask us to stay a litde while and comfort them, and with permission from higher authorities we would stay one or two weeks. Whenever this happened we stayed right beside the unit, eating and sleeping with the soldiers. When bombing raids took place, we hid in the jungle with them.

At last we arrived at Akyab, where we were to stay about a year in a three-storey building. There were comfort women from Japan and China living there in other houses. We Koreans served low-ranking soldiers and non-commissioned officers while the Japanese served solely officers. Many of the Japanese women had been *geisha* back in Japan, and there was one who looked at least 30 years old. We knew nothing about the Chinese women. Our life was just the same as it had been in Mandalay, except we didn't serve officers anymore. We moved on to other places, but continued a similar lifestyle wherever we went. Not long after we had settled in Akyab, Hondamineo arrived. I was glad to see him. He stayed with the same unit, which meant that he was with us till the war ended.

Then we moved inland to Prome. First, we again boarded a ship at Akyab. We stayed in Prome for four or five months. There were only Korean women there, and our proprietor, who had been with us all the way since we left Korea, disappeared. We guessed that he had run away because the war was intensifying. From then on, the soldiers managed us directly. They cooked our meals and handled the tickets. We were next taken by truck to Rangoon. There, we were put up in a station called the Rangoon Kaikan, which was allocated to us direcdy by soldiers. It was managed by a Japanese man, and counting those who had been there before us there were about 30 women altogether. Life was a litde easier with more women around, but the soldiers seemed more wild. I remember one drunk man who clung to me for more than an hour, hurting me terribly.

One day, a drunk soldier came in and tried to murder me with his sword. I attempted to calm him down, asking how he could do this when I was there to make him happy. He kept threatening me with his sword. So I attacked him, ready to die. He didn't expect this and dropped his sword. Without realizing what I was doing, I grabbed it and stabbed him in the chest. He was taken away, bleeding. I was arrested by the military police and stood trial before a military court. I was so frightened that I was unable to speak Japanese, although I was normally quite good at it. I explained the details of what had happened in Korean, constandy weeping. I was released after a week and started to entertain the soldiers once more. After this, I attempted to return home together with a new friend, Tsubamery, and Kim Kyehwa, my old friend from China. But I failed.

After three months in the Rangoon Kaikan, we were transferred by train to Thailand. We weren't required to serve men there but stayed for about eight weeks. It was temporary. From there we were moved to Ayutthaya on a military truck, where we were to look after wounded soldiers. At first we were trained for a few hours a day to take pulses, give injections, give ice-pack treatments and so on. We had been looking after the wounded for about four months when we heard that Korea had been liberated. We then stayed for a further three or four months, still

looking after the wounded. During this time I was the leader of my group. We didn't have to work as comfort women anymore. We weren't paid, but we worked very hard looking after the casualties.

During those three years and four months, except for a year at Akyab, we lived for short periods in many places: Mandalay, Prome, Rangoon, somewhere in Thailand and the old Thai capital, Ayutthaya. Wherever we went we were taunted and despised for being comfort women and for being Korean. We had a weekly medical examination for venereal disease, and the soldiers used condoms. If any didn't want to use a sheath, I would kick them between their legs and demand that they put one on. If a soldier still refused, I would report him to the military police. Some women had babies. I know where some of them live now, but since I don't know why they have not registered themselves with the Korean Council I won't say anything more about them. I will restrain myself from encouraging them to register.

I recall a few incidents that happened in Akyab. Once, I felt life was so miserable that I got drunk and threw myself down from the second floor. I might have covered my head with my arm, for my left arm and shoulder were badly damaged in the fall. The soldiers rushed to me and pulled my left arm in an attempt to put it back into joint. This was so painful that I fainted. I had to have my arm in plaster and stayed in hospital for three months. On one occasion I was missing my family unbearably. I went to the unit headquarters and asked if I could write home since my mother had been very ill when I had left her. They allowed me to write a letter. After some time I received a telegram saying that my mother was indeed very ill and might die soon. This was followed by another telegram that curtly said my mother was dead. I went to an officer in the unit and asked if I could send some money home so that my family could arrange a proper funeral. I was allowed to send some. When we were staying in the temporary place in Thailand, I sent home more money. I still had quite a lot of money saved in my bank-book, but the book was lost somewhere in Burma. When I sent money home the officer recommended I send all that I had, but I wanted to keep some so that I could setde down when I returned to Korea.

Talking about money, I tried very hard to save. When we were in Akyab the officers would compliment me on my good Japanese and singing ability. When they had birthday parties or farewell parties, they would often send for me along with Japanese women. They thought Fumihara Yosiko, me, to be the best Korean. We would pour drinks, dance and sing. There were two or three parties a week, and I was called to every one. They gave me tips, and I saved every penny. I wasn't beautiful but it was said that I was cute. Some officers came to sleep with me on a regular basis. Whenever they were with me, I didn't have to serve the rank and file. I saved money given to me by the officers. I was often able to get free drinks or cigarettes, and I exchanged these for cash, saving everything in my account. I was really upset when I lost the deposit book issued by the Shimonoseki Post Office.

There is also one unforgettable event that happened on the way from Mandalay to Akyab. One of the women was infected with tuberculosis, and she couldn't move any further after we had reached a certain island. All the others left, but I stayed on to look after her. She died within ten days. The soldiers wouldn't come near the body, so I burnt it and scattered her ashes at sea. I saved a few ashes and ground them into powder so that I could later pass them to her family. But, since we were being moved so often, the bag holding her ashes was also lost.

### Home Again

After Ayutthaya, we were taken by military truck to a refugee camp. Just before we left, Hondamineo asked me to go to Japan with him. But I just wanted to get home. The camp was crowded. It resembled a large school building, with a playground in the middle. We saw American jeeps arriving now and then. We lived together. After a while, we embarked on a ship bound for Korea. We landed in Inch'ön. We were kept busy on board, making flags to use when we arrived. But cholera broke out among the passengers, and the ship had to stay offshore of Inch'ön for two weeks. We had to have our whole bodies disinfected when we got off. We all had short hair and wore baggy trousers and *geta.* As we walked down the gangplank, waving the flags we had made, people on shore welcomed us with drums and gongs.[2] We could hear the anthem through a loudspeaker, '...May Korea be protected by Koreans for ever...'. We were moved to tears. Each of us received 1000 won as we disembarked. I went home as soon as I landed, to find my mother was still alive. She said that she had sent the telegram thinking that I would rush home if I thought she was dead.

I had only been back a short while when my aunt by marriage - my uncle's wife — visited and said they couldn't allow someone like me to stay at home and disgrace the family. I was not treated as a human being by my relatives. I was sad and upset, but I quickly grew bold, telling them to mind their own business. I didn't pay much attention to what they thought of me. About a year later, my mother sent me off to train at a *kwönbön,* a school for entertainment girls, *kisaeng,* in Talsöng. I was 22.

2 Korean percussion bands, known under the umbrella term nongak, were a feature of celebrations and festivals until recently.

I learned to be a *kisaeng* over three years, and I paid for my training by working part-time.

After I had finished the course I married a Mr Kim who ran a business in Taegu. He was six years older than me, and his first wife had died. He had a daughter who was already married and two other children, another daughter and a son, still living with him. I lived with them for about six years. But then his business collapsed and he took his own life without having provided for the family. So, I went back to work as a *kisaeng* to support his children and my mother. I must have been 32 by then. In the *kisaeng* house, I met another man. He was running a confectionery factory. He said he was the same age as me, but later I found out that he was three years younger and already married, with a daughter and four sons. He was caring and understanding, and never interfered with what I did. By setting up house with him, I was able to support my mother and the two children of my late husband until they became independent. I also continued to carry out the ancestral worship rituals for my deceased in-laws. When I passed 40, I brought home one of the sons of my companion, and he still behaves as if he is my own son.

There is no single healthy part in my body. I hurt everywhere. There was a time when I suffered severe insomnia. But since I have now poured out my life story to you I feel much more easy. I will be able to sleep and eat much better. Until last year, when I was first encouraged by a friend from my days at the school for entertainment girls to register with the Council, I kept my life in China to myself. I was so ashamed of what had happened that I did not want to let other people know anything about it. So I told people what had happened sparingly. Now that everyone knows the story, however, I feel I have nothing to fear. So, now I have told you everything about myself, I can rest easily.





# It Makes Me Sad That I Can't Have Children

**Yi Sunok**

*Yi Sunok was bom in 1921 in Yöngdök, North Kyöngsang province. A relative in the village had been actively involved in the independence movement against the Japanese occupation and, because of him, police surveillance was tight. When she was 17, she heard a rumour that the Japanese government was recruiting girls, and registered herself on paper though not in reality as married. It was difficult for a young girl to pretend to be a newly-wed. So, intending to earn some money, she left home with a man who had promised her work in a Japanese factory. She was taken to a comfort station in Guangdong, China.*

## Branded and Deceived

I was born in 1921 in Yöngdök, North Kyöngsang province, the first of four children. I had two sisters and a brother. My father was a farmer who sometimes worked in the gold mines near Kyöngju and Yöngch'ön. Because I was the first child and was in poor health, my parents took special care of me. They wanted to bring me up gendy and then find me a good husband. I didn't help with the farm but helped mother around the house. When I was 15 or 16, I went to evening classes in a thatched house used as the village hall to learn to read and write Korean. The teacher was a young Christian.

About that time, a distant relation lived with his family just behind our house. He had been in prison for taking part in the independence movement against the Japanese occupation while he had been studying in Japan. He and his family had lived in Kyöngju before moving to Yöngdök. My father treated him well, saying he was intelligent and had great knowledge. The authorities, though, kept a tight watch on us, on the grounds that he was a member of our lineage. If the police visited his house, they would also come to ours and search it. Sometimes my father was taken to the police station for questioning.

When I turned 30, I began to develop resdessness and to become mentally confused. I would suddenly hate my husband, my blood would run hot and cold and I would throw a fit, shouting at him to get away. He scolded me, asking if I intended him to become a monk. I would be resdess whenever I heard people talking or heard the radio or television. I would lock the door and refuse to let anybody in. I fainted when I heard gunshots. I got scared when I met people, and shuddered when I heard any loud sound. I stayed indoors for 30 years, crawling on my knees. It has only been in the last four years that I have started to walk properly. I still take medicine, tranquillizers, without which I would be restless.

I have had four children with my present husband, three daughters and a son. They are now all self-sufficient. I live with my youngest daughter, but I used to live with my first son. Even though he only went to primary school, he learned much by working for different people and used this knowledge to set up and run his own business. This became quite prosperous, but suddenly he developed mental problems when he was over 40. He was confined in Ch'öngnyangni Mental Hospital. I was called to see the doctor. He made others leave the room, and asked me if I had had my son while infected with syphilis. I dropped my head, wept and left, unable to say anything. I am to blame. I have ruined my son's life. I litde imagined that my past could make my son mentally ill after so long: hadn't he been born normal? Hadn't he grown up normal? He has now been released, but he has a fit about once a month. I am sure the doctor did not tell him anything, but last year he threw plates and dishes around and tried to attack me. He said he had gone mad because he had been born illegitimate and shouted that he would kill me. I was so scared that I left the house and moved in with my youngest daughter. My daughter-in-law had already left home.

I have lived looking forward only to death, and without telling anybody my story. My tribulation has remained buried deep in my heart. Now I have reported to the Council and I take part in various activities of theirs. But I am anxious in case anyone recognizes me. I have a husband and children, so I cannot bewail my life and be so resentful in public. If, by any chance, my children's spouses and families discover I was a comfort woman, what would become of them? I look normal on the outside, but I suffer from a nervous disorder and from diabetes. I am unable to live without medicine. Who would be able to guess what inner agony I suffer with this awful story buried in my heart? My story, as hidden as it is from those around me, will follow me to my grave.



CHAPTER 20

# From the Women's Volunteer Labour Corps to a Comfort Station

KangTökkyöng

*Kang Tokkyong was bom in 1929 in Chinju, South Kyongsang province, and lived with her grandparents after her father died and her mother remarried. Her grandparents were well o f f , and she was sent to elementary school. In 1944, when she was 16 (in Korean age) and in the first year of high school, she was sent to fapan with the first group of the Women's Volunteer Corps to an aeroplane plant in Hujiko. Life there was too hard, so one night she ran away. She was captured by a soldier who took her to an army unit where she became a comfort woman.*

## The Women's Volunteer Labour Corps

I was born in February 1929 in Sujöng ward, Chinju, South Kyongsang province. My father died when I was young, and my mother remarried, so I was brought up mosdy by her parents. My grandparents were comfortably off. Pongnae Elementary School was not far from where I lived, but I was sent to Yoshino Elementary School, now known as the Chungang Elementary School. I am one of those who graduated in the thirty-first year of the school's existence. After six years of education, I stayed at home and did nothing. My mother didn't think this was good, and sent me to a new secondary school. The school was founded the same year I began to attend, and it had only a single class of about 60 pupils.

In June 1944, when I was still in the first year of classes, I joined the first Women's Volunteer Labour Corps and was packed off to Japan. My teacher was Japanese, and he came to me and told me to join the Corps, saying I would be able to continue my study and earn money at the same time. My mother was strongly against it, and wept and pleaded with me not to go, but I had made up my mind. Two girls from my class, the head girl and I, went. The head girl was the brightest of all of us, and came from a wealthy family. Fifty girls from Chinju were gathered to join the

Corps. Fifty more boarded our train at Masan, and there were 50 more waiting when we arrived at the port of Pusan, making 150 in total. Before we left, we all trooped to the county office. A farewell ceremony was held in the yard which the county head attended. My friend read the Corps' statement of allegiance. We didn't have any ceremony when we left Chinju. We left by ferry the following morning. As we boarded the ship we began to weep. Two army ships and a number of planes formed our escort. Our ship had three decks, and we were stationed in the very bowels.

We arrived at Shimonoseki, boarded a train and were taken to an aeroplane plant in Fujiko City, Toyama prefecture. We were greeted by a middle-aged couple as we arrived. They showed us round the plant, and demonstrated how to work a lathe. The place was huge: it looked larger than the whole town of Chinju at that time. And there were many, many workers there. It was surrounded by walls, and guards were posted on the gates. We reached the plant by walking from our dormitory. We were given brownish uniforms and caps. The jackets had *Women's Volunteer Corps* sewn on them. We wore clothes we had brought with us in the dormitory, but we had to wear uniforms in the plant. We also had to don caps whenever we worked. One girl who did not wear her cap caught her hair in the machine, and she was dragged in and killed.

Our dormitory was near the main gate. The supervisor was a man, but we had a few female supervisors who helped instruct us. Before we started work, they took us on an outing to the coast near the border of Shinminato and Fusiki where many Koreans lived. We went to a village to get water, and were welcomed by Koreans, who asked if we had come from the homeland. We were delighted to meet them and there were hugs all round. The food in the plant was too bland for us, with no seasoning, so we asked the Koreans for salt. We also noted where the village was in case we ever got the chance to return.

We worked twelve-hour shifts, switching from days to nights every week. Our job was to cut components on the lathes. We had to do this with great care. Sometimes the material was so hard that the bit burned, and we would have to wait around for the machine to be repaired. All of us from Chinju used lathes, while the girls from Chölla cut steel. Once, I found some of the steel so attractive that I took it back with me to the dormitory. But a supervisor took it from me, saying I could be arrested as a spy. I remember hearing that our wages would be saved, but we never saw any savings books. The work was hard and we couldn't tolerate the hunger. We were given cooked rice, soya bean soup and pickled radish, but in tiny quantities. We would sometimes count each grain of rice so that we could





savour it, or we sometimes' gobbled the whole lot in just three spoonfuls. Some girls saved some of the rice to eat later. For lunch we would get three small slices of soya bean cake, *tabu,* which we often ate before lunch because of our ever-present hunger. When we were on night shifts we got breakfast after work then nothing until the evening. We were so hungry we sometimes stole food meant for different rooms. We little thought that the girls in other rooms might starve because of us. I was so hungry I sent my grandparents a postcard asking for food. They sent salt and beans, which temporarily appeased the hunger. I regretted the fact that in childhood I had often worried my grandmother by refusing to eat properly.

There were three older Japanese women who worked in the plant. They commuted from their homes and brought packed lunches. Sometimes I sent a postcard asking my grandmother to send washing soap, and exchanged this with the Japanese women for rice or salt. Because of hunger and overwork, one of the girls from Chölla went crazy and was sent back home. Later, another girl pretended to be mad, rolling about on the road, but the supervisors realized she was only pretending and didn't let her go. We spent the winter in the plant. The snow was piled so thickly on the roof that it hid the structure. They made a canopy along the road from the plant to our dormitory. Whenever we worked on night shifts the Japanese workers had supper at the appropriate time, but we ate only soya bean cake rations meant for our tea. We would cry ourselves to sleep, crouched around the stove.

The dormitory rooms were the size of twelve *tatami* mats, and a dozen or so girls slept in each. We each had three sets of bedding including mats and quilts. The dormitory was so huge we never saw all of it nor knew who slept where. There were no Japanese women, and we Koreans were grouped according to our home towns, Chinju, Masan, Chölla province, and so on.

Amongst those of us from Chinju, my friend was named captain and I her deputy. I don't remember who gave us these nicknames. I don't remember that we did anything special, except that we wrote the words to a song, which I can still remember. The words were in Japanese and accompanied a military song we had learned earlier in our school:

*Ah, across mountains and seas,*
*We, the Women's Volunteer Corps, have come thousands of miles.*
*The Korean peninsula, seen far away on the horizon,*
*Our mothers'faces shine from there.*

As the snow fell, we Chinju girls would walk around singing.

Once, the girls in our room staged a strike. We agreed to stay in bed and to refuse to get up one morning. When the supervisor came to wake

us, we remained with our eyes closed, pretending to be sleeping. The set hour when we were meant to start work passed and we didn't go. But we received no food and were heavily reprimanded. About two months after we arrived, we had become so hungry that we tried to run away early one morning. My friend and I ran to a Korean in Shinminato, whom we had met before. However, the supervisors somehow found out where we were and came for us. We were taken back and slapped on the face many times. We were scolded severely, and told we should set a good example not try to run away. Fifty more girls came from Chinju later. Among them, Kang Yöngsuk was one year younger than me. I scolded her and told her she should never have volunteered, saying how hard life was. We looked for an opportunity to run away, and after a while my friend and I seized our chance again.

## A Comfort Woman

It was night. We sneaked under the barbed wire, and ran in the opposite direction from the one we had taken during our previous escape attempt. We wandered around not far from the plant but were seized by a military policeman. We had promised to stay together whatever befell us and held hands tighdy, but I found myself alone when I was thrown into a truck. I was left alone with the policeman and a driver.

My captor had three stars on his red lapel. I didn't know his name or rank at first, but later found out his name was Corporal Kobayasi Tadeo. He sat with the driver through the journey, but half-way through stopped the vehicle and told me to get off. It was very dark; nothing was visible. He raped me. I had no experience of sex, so I was too scared even to try resisting. If such a thing happened now, I would kill myself by biting my tongue off. But at that time I was scared and helpless.

We got back on the truck and rode further until we arrived at an army unit. Two guards stood outside, and behind the buildings was a tent. My captor took me there and told me to stay put. There were already five or so women there, who looked at me in a daze and said nothing. Soon, day dawned. The tent was partitioned into five or six cubicles. Mine was the size of one and a half *tatami*, but had no actual mat. I slept on a simple military bed. Most of the women were older than me, and at first I was scared and not sufficiendy composed to talk with them, so I didn't realize what we were there for.

Some three days later, Kobayasi came and had sex with me again. Then, other soldiers began to come. I served about ten a day. No one came during the day, although they would visit on Saturday afternoons. No one stayed overnight except for Kobayasi. He came often. We women generally slept in one place. Our number was less than the number of soldiers, so we couldn't have any days off. I remained scared, and my abdomen hurt a lot, so I didn't get a chance to think about anything else. The soldiers from other units would sometimes take us out. I was called Harue, and if a soldier called one of our names, that particular woman had to follow him, carrying a blanket. We had to serve coundess soldiers on the wild mountainside. My abdomen, my womb, throbbed with pain. I had to serve so many men. Afterwards, I would be unable to walk back to the tent, and the soldier would have to drag me off the mountainside. I can't describe in words the misery I endured.

Kobayasi brought me clothes, and I also had the clothes I had been wearing when I ran away from the plant. Our food came from the army, and I remember balls of cooked rice. We ate on a low table on the ground. Kobayasi sometimes secretly brought me extra balls of rice and dried biscuits. I was scared at first, but later I stopped being afraid of him. I didn't get any medical examination. After some time, the army unit moved. The soldiers boarded a long, khaki vehicle which looked like a posh taxi and three trucks. We women got on one of the trucks with other soldiers. We moved in the dark.

It probably took less than a day to arrive at the next site. As we drove along, I could see a river on one side and mountains on the other. The new site was near water, perhaps a lake or a broad river, and was surrounded by fields and trees. A lot of snow had fallen. The army compound was huge with flat-roofed low buildings built haphazardly. Unlike where we had been before, there were quite a number of private residences. We were taken to a house which also had a flat roof. The entrance led to a corridor off which there were many rooms. Each had a window facing the back yard. Each had *tatami* mats. There were about 20 of us housed there, in quite crowded conditions. Those who had been there when we arrived often went out, on some days leaving just five or six of us. The unit was large, but not many soldiers came. We served maybe five or six a day. Some stayed overnight. There was no exchange of money or tickets.

To the left of the entrance was a large room, and to the right was a row of small rooms. We would usually sit in the large room while the soldiers queued up outside the door then walked in. Each soldier would call out for the woman he wanted, and go with her into one of the small rooms. Each room was big enough for two people to lie in, leaving just a small space. Each had a mattress, blanket and hot water tin. We were told to place the tin under our feet or to cuddle it when it was cold, but I don't remember a very cold winter when I was there. I had regained my bearings somewhat since the move, and now began to ask questions of one of the women, Poksun, or of Kobayasi. Poksun and I lived in the same

building. She said she had been there the longest of all of us, and she certainly looked over 30. I asked her how far we were from Toyama and where exactly we were. She replied that she didn't know Toyama and told me the name of the place where we were, although I can't remember it now. She also said that the civilian bastards who controlled the station kept all the money involved although they were meant to give it to us. She said 'Poor you, you were seized by a soldier, yet you don't get paid'.

I tried to befriend Kobayasi, believing that I might be able to run away if I coaxed him sufficiendy. I smiled at him for the first time, and asked if it was far to Toyama. At first, he refused to tell me anything, saying our location was a military secret. But later he told me this was a place prepared for the Emperor to escape to. He said the Emperor would be coming. On some occasions he refused to say anything, claiming the answer to my question was a military secret, but at the same time he promised to let me go home soon. Once he asked if I had worked at the plant. I think he knew my past. I didn't speak to any soldiers except Kobayasi. I fell ill and, in my misery, wrote a song with a borrowed pencil.

*Ah, crossing from one mountain to another,*
*I came to the Women's Volunteer Corps a thousand miles away from home;*
*But I was captured by a sergeant*
*And my body torn asunder.*

I set these words to a military tune I had learnt at the plant. One day, I sang it to Kobayasi, but he quickly stopped me. From then on, he didn't visit me as frequently as before. I don't think I spoke to anybody except for Kobayasi and Poksun. Whenever I bumped into any of the other women, we would exchange glances and nod. I remember hearing their names, Meiko, Akiko, and so on, when soldiers called for them. I lived in my own world.

I remember several men who wore khaki but no rank badges and who visited the comfort station often. They brought our meals, but we women didn't eat together. The rice was always short, although we also had soya bean soup and pickled radish. Once in a while they would give us fried plants culled from the mountains. Once, Kobayasi, in a somewhat drunken stupor, brought me *sushi.* Poksun sometimes went out in the evening, to where I don't know, and came back having had a good supper. When asked by the others where she had been, she would simply say 'the house over there'. Sometimes she brought some garden vegetables back. Kobayasi continued to bring me clothes. I didn't wear a Japanese kimono, but rather blouses and skirts. I was always ill and





wanted to stay in bed, so I hardly ventured outside. I found it difficult to walk straight because of the pains in my abdomen. Poksun sometimes told me that many soldiers would soon come from the south, and I became scared of Saturdays, when most of the men came, more than death. I stopped thinking about anything except running away.

## Return

One day, it fell strangely quiet. I walked with one of the women to the unit. There were no guards in sight and inside all the soldiers were weeping, crouched on the ground. We couldn't understand what had happened, so walked to the street, where we heard people shouting in jubilation. There was a Korean on a truck, holding a flag, and the street was crowded with people from many places. They seemed to be men drafted by the Japanese. I grabbed another Korean and asked what was going on, where he was going, and pleading with him to take me with him. He reeled back in surprise and asked what I was doing there. I didn't tell him I had been a comfort woman. I just asked him to take me to Toyama, since I thought Koreans lived only in the area around Shinminato. He said he would take me to Osaka, and I rushed back to the station, quickly packed and jumped on his truck. Two or three of the women took the truck together, while the others went their own way. In Osaka, the driver gave me some balls of cooked rice and asked someone to take me to Shinminato by truck or train.

I went to Pang, the man who had given me food when I first ran away. He asked me where I'd been and what I'd done, and I told him. He let me stay until I could leave for Korea. I helped cook and launder for four or five months until, in the depths of winter, Pang, his family and I travelled to Osaka. We boarded an unlicensed ship. His wife had died, and he was living with his children. He was dating a Japanese woman in the neighbourhood, and she also came with us. It was this woman who noticed I was pregnant, even before I knew it. When I had first been seized by the military police, I had never had a period. I had begun to bleed a little when I was in the second comfort station, and I must have become pregnant almost immediately afterwards. I tried to throw myself off the ship as we crossed the sea to Korea, but this woman sensed what was going on and followed me everywhere, making it impossible for me to take my own life. Pang came from Chölla province, and we went to the town of Namwön when we got to Korea. Returnees were put up in the Kuksu guest-house, which had been run by the Japanese during the occupation. The repatriates stayed in one section while the National Defence Corps were billeted in another. I gave birth in January 1946, and Pang's woman helped with the birth. I stayed on for

a few more months. Although the woman loved Pang and had willingly come to a foreign country to live with him, she found it difficult to set-de down and decided to return to Japan. On her way to Pusan to find a ship bound for Japan, she took me to Chinju.

When I got home, my mother told me I couldn't live at home with my son. She was sorry for me, so asked a distant uncle to take me to Pusan. He went with me to a large orphanage managed by the Catholics, and I left my child there. He found me work in P'yönghwa restaurant in Ch'oryang. From there I could visit the orphanage to see my son every Sunday. But when I got there one day I noticed another child wearing my son's clothes, and discovered that he had died of pneumonia. He was only four years old. I never saw my dead child with my own eyes, so I found his death difficult to accept. I have never married.

From then on I did all kinds of work, waiting in restaurants, selling things, helping with housework, keeping a boarding house, and so on. Maybe I am ill-fated, because something would go wrong or I would be taken ill every time I was about to be able to save some money. I don't even have a proper house that I can rent now. I become ill very easily. When I was young, I used to roll around my room with period pains. I had to have injections to relieve the throbbing. And I bled copiously. I went to herbal doctors and to a gynaecological surgery. I would even have danced naked if I could have been relieved from so much suffering. The doctors told me that the lining of my womb and my fallopian tubes were infected. My periods, which had started properly only when I was 18, stopped before I reached 40. Since then, I have had no monthly pain, but I have been hospitalized several times with bladder infections.

The reason I came forward to report to the Council was to pour out my resentment. I have tried to write down my experiences several times, but because I have had to move so often, I kept losing the notes. I am telling my life story so that nobody else Will ever have to go through the same things as me. I think we must try to get what we jusdy deserve from Japan: a proper apology and proper compensation. There are still some who say tHäFwhat we did is shameful, but they are indeed ignorant people.



CHAPTER20

# Shut Away Close to Home

**Yun Turi**

*Yun Turi was born in 1928 in Pusan. Herfather was a fairly prosperous builder, but her brother became mentally deranged after marrying and left home. After her father died, the family fortunes sank and they were soon living in poverty. In 1942, Yun went to work in the Samhwa Factory and then in a complex that made military uniforms. In the latter place a Japanese manager harassed her, and she looked around for an alternative job. As she passed the railway station an officer called to her from the police station, and when she followed him inside she was forcibly taken to the First Pusan Comfort Station.*

## I Was Born Into a Prosperous Family, But...

I was born in 1928, the fourth child in a family of three boys and four girls. My eldest brother finished secondary school, but the rest of us only managed to finish or only started elementary school. I was sent to Ch'önyön Elementary School in Seoul, whereas my brothers and sister all went to schools in Pusan. I was born in Pusan and lived there until I was eight, but then I moved to my aunt's in Seoul from where I went to school. The reason for the move was because a fortune-teller told my family I would not live long because I had a short upper lip, and so to avoid misfortune I should live apart from my parents.

My father was in the building business. He didn't drink and treated his children very well. We owned a number of paddy fields and vegetable fields, which, rather than farm ourselves, we let out to tenants. Our house stood in front of the Chosön Fabric Company and was huge; it was about 200 *p'yöng,* 720 square metres, in size. But after my eldest brother married, trouble set in at home. Only a month after the mar-riage, he became mentally disturbed and would frequently leave home. Then my father died, and the family fortunes began to sink rapidly.

In 1941, when I was 14 years old, I went home to find all our fields gone and the house sold. My family, my sick father, mother, two sisters