

# Comfort Women Speak

Testimony by Sex Slaves of the Japanese Military

*Includes new United Nations human rights report*



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*Featuring photographs by Soon Mi Yu*

*(2000)*



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# Kim Bun-sun

I am Kim Bun-sun, 72 years old. I grew up in Namhan-dong, Dong-myon, Chilgook-kun, a village about seven miles from Taegu, a city in the southern part of Korea. I am the eldest child of my family. One day, when I was 15 years old, I went to a nearby field to gather edible wild greens with my four-year old brother. A man dressed in a Japanese policeman's uniform approached us. Suddenly he seized me with force, put me on a truck, and drove off to Taegu City. My little brother could not explain this kidnapping to my family. No one in my family knew what happened to me afterwards. When the truck arrived at a strange place in Taegu, I saw about ten young Korean girls like me who had already been forced to go there.

Later we were taken to Pusan, a harbor city located at the southern tip of the Korean peninsula. They boarded us on a ship for Japan. I did not know where in Japan we were taken. Soon more and more Korean girls were brought there, and for a week we were all

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taught the Japanese language. We were then taken aboard a ship to Pyongyang, a city in the northern part of Korea. There again, more Korean girls were added to our group and all of us were sent to Shinuiju, a border city between Korea and Manchuria, then to Mukden in China, and finally to Taiwan.

Taiwan was the first place we were forced to serve as "comfort women" for three months. After that they took us to Manila where we were joined by the Filipino "comfort women." This kind of life lasted four years until I was 19 years old.

Our place in Manila was near a military camp and was managed by military personnel. We were provided with boiled rice and a side dish of vegetables. The food was not enough, and we always went hungry. We wore civilian clothes like skirts and "mompae" or trousers for women in the traditional Japanese style. I had regular menstruation, and they supplied me with sanitary belts.

There were many "comfort women" in the house I was in, all Korean girls between the ages of sixteen and nineteen. I had to service 15 to 20 soldiers on weekdays and many more on weekends. They gave me tickets, not currency. I had to take these tickets to my manager for goods that I needed. I never knew how much a ticket was worth. I brought home some of these tickets with me, along with my photographs taken by the soldiers who had cameras. My name then was "Hanako." The photos were all lost during the Korean war.

I was infected with venereal diseases a number of times. Frequently they treated me with "#606," made of arsenic and used for treating syphilis in those days. Condoms were supplied too, but some of the girls still became pregnant. Fortunately, I did not then, but it is tragic I could not ever bear a child.

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The difficulties to bear in those days were hunger and not being able to send letters home. But the most difficult thing was enduring the life of a sex slave. I cried often and ran away several times. Each time guards caught me, brought me back to the house and physically punished me. The beating was so severe that my back was permanently injured, and my face became mangled. People used to tell me I was pretty until then.

While in Manila, servicing sex to so many soldiers became increasingly unbearable. I cried and begged Sergeant (Gunso) Yamamoto in charge of our camp to send me home. Finally he gave in. He gave me some money for travel and shipped my things for me. I was lucky I met someone like Sergeant Yamamoto. I came home through Manchuria.

When I got home, my father was deceased, and my mother was having a hard time alone with small children. For four years she had no idea of my whereabouts; she assumed I was dead. She was very surprised and happy to have me back home. Occasionally, she asked me about those four years I was away. I vaguely told her that the Japanese authorities sent me to Japan where I worked for four years. I could not tell her the truth and details. From then on, I stayed at mother's house for the next 22 years. There I made a living by peddling almost everything I could lay my hands on, such as tobacco, vegetables, and rice-cakes. Then I met a man and moved into his house as his concubine.

I now have just two sisters who are still alive. I communicate with them once in a while. Other than that, I have no one. No children. I am in poor health. I live alone and I will die alone.

*Interviewed on November 2, 1994, in Seoul*

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*David M. ...*



# Kim Sang-hi

I am Kim Sang-hi, 73 years old. I was born on December 20, 1920. I have no family now; four years ago I lost my last sister. There were five of us, two brothers and three sisters; I was the fourth child.

One 'fateful' photograph that changed my life forever. I was just 14 years old. It was the 12th year of *Shōwa* (1937). My family had moved from our home-town, Mi-ryang, Kyungsang Province, to Taegu City, where my older brother got a job. It was around November 26th. It snowed, I remember.

After supper, I went to the photo-studio with my girl friend and picked up my portrait photo. On our way home, I was startled by someone from behind ripping off my head cover and then grabbing the back of my collar. We were both so shocked that we almost fainted.

A man dressed in olive-drab clothing and wearing a cap started to curse at us in Japanese. I couldn't tell if that s.o.b., pardon my language, was a Japanese or a Korean, because at that time of the Japanese occupation, we Koreans all had to speak Japanese.

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I noticed a truck and two other men. The two men grabbed me on both sides while the third one pushed me from the back. I fell forward on top of something. I realized it was a person. I began to hear mournful sounds of weeping coming from all corners. Soon I felt my friend fall on my back. The truck rolled on and arrived at Taegu Railway Station where some 100 girls were waiting for our load.

We rode the train all night, passing through Shinuiju, crossing the border into China, and finally reaching Dairen, where we got off. We went into a house, or rather it must have been some kind of a traveler's inn. There an old lady brought us some breakfast, mumbling to herself, "Poor things!" I thought to myself, "What a fate I must be in now!"

After breakfast, we were ordered to move on—this time to a dock where we got on a ship. I can't remember well whether it was one night or two to reach Shanghai. The city was completely bombed and all the buildings were destroyed.

We were told to go into a tavern-like place, where I saw girls with painted lips and long, disgusting fingernails. I was so shocked to see these girls because I had never seen such girls before. My friend and I huddled in the corner and cried quietly even though we were given orders not to cry. I didn't want to be like those girls. I wanted to die right there and then, but there was no poison to kill myself with, no ropes to hang myself from.

The men took away all our own clothes and gave us navy-colored skirts, sweaters, and outer-coverings with strange-looking greenish and yellowish colors. In three days, about 150 abducted girls were dispatched in groups of two to three, to different places. I was sent to Suzhou, China with 14 other girls.

What I had to go through from then on, what had been done to me, I don't ever want to talk about it again, I don't ever want to hear about it . . .

At Suzhou I was led into a house with a sign-board that read "comfort station." I saw only soldiers, saw no civilians. The soldiers gave out numbers to us. I was #4. My own name was replaced with a Japanese name "Takeda Sanai." I found out later that I was the youngest in our group. I was so enraged, so desperate that all I could think of was killing myself.

The first night, an officer came into my cubicle at the "comfort station." He said something to me but I didn't understand his Japanese. His body language suggested that I should not fear him. He took off his clothes, and then grabbed my body. I was so scared that I hung onto my long underwear that my mother had sewn for me. I must have fainted right then, because when I came to, my underwear was ripped and stained with fresh blood. I was a virgin until that moment. I screamed in pain.

Soon after that, another soldier opened my door. I thought to myself I am going to die again. So I told him I had to use the toilet. Inside the bathroom, I spotted a glass bottle, opened the cap, smelled disinfectant, and drank the whole bottle. Not long after that, I began to spit blood from my mouth, and I was also bleeding from my vagina. The disappointed soldier reported this to his superior, and I was rushed to an army clinic.

I don't know how they revived me. They must have pumped me out with tubes in my mouth and in my anus. When I finally came to at the clinic, I saw soldiers all around the hallway. I said to myself, 'I didn't die? I am still here? I can't go on. I can't go on. How can I?'

After two weeks' treatment at the clinic, I was released and back again at the "comfort station." My vagina became so swollen that I had to be treated again at the clinic. I wanted to flee to Nanjing, but the only way out was by boat from Suzhou. It was impossible not to be spotted on a boat and then shot on the spot by the guards.

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After three years in Suzhou, I was transported to Nanjing. There I caught malaria and almost died. But, again, I didn't die. I should have. Next I had appendicitis. At the clinic the nurses put ice on my head and buttocks for pain for three days, because they did not have modern medical facilities. After this, I got sick again—hemorrhaging from my vagina and was again hospitalized for two weeks. Out of my nine years as a "comfort woman," almost a total of three years were spent at the clinics. Was God helping me?

The soldiers were allotted 30 minutes each for sex, and they queued up in long lines in front of the cubicles at the "comfort station." If a soldier was even one minute longer than his allotted time, the next soldier in line would pound on the door fiercely. These soldiers were so greedy that if they couldn't have women, they would have sex even with dogs.

My camp life in Nanjing lasted about three years. World War II broke out. Then I was shipped to Singapore, around February of 1943. I got on the second cargo ship of the six-ship fleet that carried soldiers and about 600 girls, all Korean except for some 20 Japanese girls. On the way to Singapore, the fourth ship was struck with bombs and completely destroyed. We were detained about 15 days in Taiwan because of the heavy bombing. The lower area of the ship was divided into two sections with ropes, one for the soldiers and one for the girls. I still remember the instructions given to us about sharks in case we got bombed and thrown into the sea.

About three months later, around June, we finally reached Singapore. When I got off the ship, I saw, for the first time, very dark-skinned men. Clothed only in their underwear, they were digging ditches. When they noticed us, they looked as if they would burst into tears any second. Later on I realized they must have been the POWs of the Allied Forces.

I was then led into a warehouse where bunches of bananas were strung with strings. We ate those bananas and stale bread. The surface of the bread was so hard that I could



only eat the inside of the bread. We were again divided into three groups. The first group of 20 Japanese girls was dispatched to officers' barracks; I was in the second group of about 20 girls; and others were sent to various places like Sumatra, Java, and other islands.

So my life in Singapore lasted until the end of World War II in 1945. In Singapore I remember seeing Korean men who were working as support troops, Japanese military guards of the POWs and other "comfort women." I also remember a few names of the Japanese captors: Lt. Kuda, Sergeant Tanaka, Maida, Sakai....

After the atomic bomb was dropped, one military support person, a Korean, came around my cubicle and told me to keep my spirits up and to persevere just a little bit longer. The bombing was so heavy that the smoke completely obscured the trees right in front of me. I also remember falling into a ditch from the impact of a bombing.

I did not have access to a radio or such. I knew nothing about the Japanese surrender. I was starving. There was a Korean man about 50 years old, by the name of Cho In-soo. He collected leftover food from the Japanese military camps with which he raised pigs and then supplied the camps with pork meat. So when he went from camp to camp, he knew where the "comfort women" were. One day he knocked on my door and told me to get into his truck. He took me to a log cabin built by the Korean laborers.

The Allied Forces in Singapore took hold of the Japanese camps, and the Japanese personnel administered the "comfort women." We were all starving because they would give only half the allotted portion of food to us. So we picked the leaves from trees and gathered wild greens that were not poisonous, and boiled them into soup. We ate this with some salt and tried to survive.

This grass soup was so harsh for my stomach that I started hemorrhaging. Mr. Cho had a Japanese friend, Mr. Matsumoto, who was in boat-building business. Luckily, through

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him we got a car from the Japanese camp, and I was rushed to the army hospital. The hospital was permitted to operate for two more weeks before disbanding. I remember the warm cloth over the intravenous needle stuck in my thigh, seeing a nurse in tears when I woke up from my dream in the hospital bed, and hearing a doctor's instruction not to spare the best medication for "this poor girl."

There were two support persons in the temporary office of the Allied Forces. They knew some English because they graduated from Waseda and Meiji Universities in Japan. One day when a Mr. Smith came, they interpreted for me. When he asked me how I was doing, I replied that I was starving. So he said he would send me some military ration boxes the next day. When the boxes arrived, we were so starved that we overate and got sick. So then he sent us some medicine for that.

There is one thing that I regret so much to this day. When Mr. Smith came to see me, why didn't it occur to me to ask him about reparations for all these forced sex services? Why didn't I think of getting some kind of an official document about my having been a "comfort woman?" Why didn't anyone? The suffering all these years of "comfort women" could have been less.

Finally I made it back to Pusan Harbor, got sprayed all over my body and hair with DDT, and got stamped on my hand. I was freed. I went to my brother's house in Taegu first. He told me later that the night before I returned, he had seen me in his dream—I had shaved my head, and I was drowning in the ocean. He was recounting this dream to mother just as I was walking into the gate, looking like a ghost covered with white DDT. Upon seeing this scene, mother and father thought they were actually seeing my ghost and fainted

on the spot. I also fainted seeing them faint. My brother's wife threw buckets of cold water on us, and we finally gained consciousness.

My family didn't ask me about my past; they must have just guessed. I was 24 years old, still a marriageable age. So my parents tried to arrange my marriage, and this was the most painful thing. How could I get married? I had been raped and raped, and my body had been used over and over. My heart was ripped and torn so many times.

In August of 1949, my father passed away, and then mother died in April of 1950. I had no place to go. So I went to my aunt's in Pusan, but she also passed away shortly after. My brother was doing okay, but I didn't want to live with his family. So an uncle of mine bought me a small tire repair shop and asked his friend to manage it. I didn't make any profit from this; my manager probably was stealing from me. So I quit the business. From then on, I barely made my living by knitting custom-made sweaters and skirts for people. In 1978 I came up to Seoul and became a live-in maid at a Mr. Lee's house.

I was born into a good family and was raised properly. I never went outside the house much until I was so suddenly abducted that evening. Now, no family, no children, I am only growing old. Whenever I see an old lady of about my age walking hand in hand with her grandchild, my heart wrenches.

I became a Catholic, but I still cannot find solace in religion. I should forget and forgive, but I cannot. I try and try, but I cannot let go of it. When I wake up every morning, my head subconsciously turns east toward Japan, and I curse her. I cannot help it.

*Interviewed in Seoul, October 29, 1994*

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*admitted  
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