

Out of the silent prison

A profile of Jan Ruff-O'Herne

Jan Ruff-O'Herne was a prisoner once, during World War II in Java. She thought about that experience all her life. In fact, she was haunted by it. She wanted never to be a prisoner again.

But something happened in 1991 when she was watching television from her comfortable living room in Kingswood, Australia. She heard the story of the courageous former comfort women of Korea and how they were coming forward and telling their stories, risking humiliation and possible rejection of their society so that the truth would be known before they were gone. Suddenly she was a prisoner all over again - a prisoner of conscience.

"I had to come forward. I knew that as the first European woman to come forward and tell her story, I could make a difference," she said.

Paradoxically, it was this prison of conscience that was to set her free from a past of silence and suffering. But before the world found out, a few other people needed to know first. She had to tell her children and her grandchildren about the experiences she had as a prisoner of war, and then as a comfort woman in a Japanese officer's club in her home town of Semarang, Central Java. It was not an easy thing to do.

It started in 1942, she told them. She was 19. All the families in her town were rounded up and put in prison camps, the women and children in one, the men in another. Ruff-O'Herne's account (excerpted) before the Women's International War Crimes Tribunal on December 9 in Tokyo, was the following:

We had to sleep on the floor. The place was overrun with rats, mice, bugs... the roofs were leaking, we had a starvation diet, the hygiene was absolutely atrocious and the sewage was soon overflowing and we had to empty it by hand with buckets. We were totally surrounded by barbed wire and by Japanese guards. We could not escape, and many thousands of woman and children died of starvation, malaria, dysentery, and all sorts of diseases. We had no medicine. We spent three and a half years in that Japanese concentration camp.

The Japanese thought of all sorts of ways to punish us. We always



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had to bow or we would be beaten. We had to stand for hours in the sun for roll call. ... We were often beaten and tortured.

...Two years later in February 1944, Japanese officials entered the camp and all the girls between 17 and 28 were registered. We were all very suspicious ... One day a military vehicle arrived ... A sort of selection process took place. ... It became obvious that they were trying to pick the prettiest girls. They lined us up, they looked at our legs, some of them would lift up our chins so they could see our faces. They giggled and sneered among themselves. Some girls were told to step back. And so the line got smaller and smaller. And finally there were only ten girls left standing and I was one of those ten.

And then ... we were told we had to pack a few things and that we would be ... taken away, out of the camp. ... the whole camp protested. Trucks then drove to a hillside area of Semarang which I knew very well, because I lived in Semarang. ... The house was surrounded by fencing and barbed wire so we could see straight away that there was no escape possible from the house.

... we were soon told that we were in the house for the sexual pleasure of the Japanese military. It was as if my whole world collapsed under my feet when I heard that. And we all protested, we said we would never do this...

I even mentioned the word Geneva Convention, and they just said they would do with us as they liked.

They produced papers for us to sign. ... we couldn't read the papers. They were written in Japanese. We refused to sign. We had an idea that it was probably a consent form. That we were willingly going to be in this house and do this thing. We refused to sign anything, and we never did. (When they refused) we were beaten, and beaten, and beaten until I was so dizzy in my head I could hardly stand, but we never signed.

Our generation was a very innocent generation. ... I even at that stage had a religious vocation. ... I was brought up by the Franciscan nuns. And I wanted to be a nun, so, to have this happen, well, I can't describe it.

Very soon after that, the whole house was set up to function as a brothel. Our photographs were taken and they were put on a pin up board in the front. ... So the whole place was getting ready for opening night.

We were all told on opening night that we had to go to our own bedrooms. ... we refused. We all huddled together around the dining room table. And we could hear and see more and more Japanese coming into the house. The crude laughter. The cleats cutting the floor. We were eaten up by complete fear. ... So, I led the girls in prayer, ... I shall never

forget all the screams as the girls were dragged away. ... I hid under the dining room table. Of course very soon I was dragged out from under the table.

He was a high ranking officer with a samurai sword. A big fat, bold-looking man. Immediately, I kicked him, fought with him, but he

was so strong. He dragged me to the bedroom. ... I fought him. I tried to make him understand that I was here against my will. He just threw me in the corner. He ... started to threaten me with his sword ... I made him understand that he could kill me. I was quite ready to die, rather than be taken by him. ... I wanted to say some prayers before I would die. So I went on my knees and as I was saying my prayers and he was starting to undress himself, and I realized that he had no intention of killing me. I would be no good to him dead. He threw me on the bed, and tore off all my clothes. And with his sword, he continued to threaten me. He continued to hold his sword over my body as he was raping me. He continued to play with me as a cat would play with a mouse. I begged him, but he brutally raped me. Of course he did not stop.

... And there were a whole line of Japanese waiting for me. And ... this went on all night. The next morning there were a crying group of girls, all huddled together, all crying over our lost virginity... Where could we go? What could we do? And this was only the first day. This would go on.

... I was in that house for three months. The rapes continued for the whole time we were there. I even tried to make myself look so ugly so that they wouldn't want me. ... I cut off my hair right down to the scalp. I thought then no one would want me. But it

had the opposite effect. ... Everyone wanted to have the girl who had cut all her hair off.

... After about three months we were told to pack up our things again. Because we were going to be transported. ... I thought we might be taken to a worse brothel. We were put on trains... Two days and two nights train journey to West Java. ... we were reunited in a camp with our mothers and siblings. ... We were kept separate - a camp within a camp. The Japanese threatened us that if we would ever tell anyone what they had done to us, they would kill us and our families. The silence really started there and then. We were too afraid to tell. We were in that separate camp until the end of the war.

When the war was over ... it was terrible because they called us Japanese whores. Some of the women really thought we had done this in order to get better food. So, again, a silence was forced upon us. ... And I only talked about it once with my mother. She couldn't cope with it.

Her two daughters and three grandchildren knew the rest. That she had met Tom O'Herne, her future husband, in the wake of the war. That Tom had been mobilized back to England, that she had joined him there, and that they had been married in England in 1946. That, in 1960 the couple had immigrated to Australia and become citizens, and brought up their family there. Her daughters, who were completely supportive of their mother's quest for justice, learned later that her mother had shared the story with her husband Tom, who died in 1985, and with her parents, but with no one else.

After her marriage in '46, the silence descended. Ruff-O'Herne lived the life of a normal wife and mother. At least, she tried to think of it as normal. Her body was "a mess" because of all she had endured, she said. She had four miscarriages, and finally a "major operation" so that she could bear children. She was haunted by sleeplessness and nightmares. She admittedly never enjoyed her sexual relation-

continued next page