

The *halmonis* live in a private residence with nurses and assistants, while the House of Sharing staff work in a building close to the residence. In front of the House of Sharing, sculptures commemorate the strength and courage of the grandmothers. To the left, another building with a large, main room is used for groups that visit the House of Sharing to learn about the facility and the comfort women issues. Once a month, (twice during the summer months) there is an English language tour that leaves from Seoul for the 90 minute trip.

Each visit begins with a short documentary about Duk-Kyung Kang, the first former comfort woman to come forward with her story. Then, an English, Korean or Japanese speaking volunteer takes a small group on a tour of the Historical Museum of Japanese Military Sexual Slavery, located in a building to the right of the private residence. The museum displays documents written in Japanese, objects from comfort stations, photographs of former comfort women and maps showing the location of comfort stations across Asia Pacific at that time.

The second floor houses the artwork of many *halmonis* who learned to paint at The House of Sharing as a form of art therapy. Paintings entitled *Purity Lost Forever*, *Unblossomed Flower*, *Japanese Soldier Picking Pear*, *Punish Those Responsible* and *Kidnapped* depict the shame and anger the women endured silently for many years. In part because of the Korean patriarchal social structure, many of the former comfort women kept silent about their experiences until the Korean Council's campaigns persuaded them to come forward. Before the Korean Council's efforts to educate Korean society about the plight of these women, many believed they should be ashamed and embarrassed as women about their sexual victimization, instead of speaking out about surviving Japanese Imperial aggression.

ONE CRUSADER'S STORY

After the museum tour, visitors go back to the education room, and one of the resident former comfort women speaks to the group. All of



Ok Sun Lee shares her story and testimony to a visiting group of English speakers through translator and volunteer So Jung Im.

PHOTO BY STEPHEN WUNKROW



Artwork by Duk-Kyung Kang, *Innocence Stolen*.

the women who are healthy enough take turns sharing their personal history as a survivor of the Japanese military sexual slavery system. On a recent tour, Ok-Sun Lee carefully gave a detailed account (through a bilingual volunteer interpreter) of how she had to service at least 15 men a day and more on the weekends. She tried to escape many times but was caught and sometimes beaten and stabbed after she was dragged back to the comfort station.

After the war ended, she stayed in China, living in poverty. She got the chance to return to Korea in the late '80s, but she had no official nationality, since she had been taken from her country while all of its residents were still considered Japanese citizens.

It took her one and a half years to restore her Korean citizenship.

At the end of her testimony, she said, "I am embarrassed to tell you all this personal information." She continued, "I do not blame young Japanese people. I want them to be educated." Lee said she studies Japanese language because she wants to be able to tell her story directly to Japanese people who visit The House of Sharing. She told the roomful of young people that because she is old and weak, she hopes they will help give her a voice and not let this issue ever be forgotten.

The House of Sharing received a guest of honor in November 2007.



U.S. Representative Mike Honda on a visit to the House of Sharing in November 2007.

Congressman Mike Honda accepted an invitation from the House of Sharing to visit after House Resolution 121, which he authored and cosponsored, was unanimously passed by the U.S. House of Representatives. Murayama Ippei, a Japanese researcher who lives in the private residence with the *halmonis*, said "Mike Honda took his time at the museum. He genuinely cared and asked a lot of questions. He was extremely interested in meeting the rest of the grandmothers living here."

The planning and sincerity that go into the tours, particularly the honest personal testimonies of the former comfort women, make the

visits a poignant and powerful experience. When asked about her feelings in telling her story to a roomful of strangers, resident Il-Chul Kang replied "It is painful to talk about, but it is very important for me to do."

There is ample proof in the testimonies of the eyewitnesses, scholarly research, and original Japanese documents that Japan systematically mobilized women to be sexual slaves for its Imperial Army. Since Hak-Chul Kim first came forward in 1991 until the present, the posture of the Japanese government has been to wait out this issue. There is a logical strategy to this stance.

Because of the age of the survivors, there is a point at which the issue will be much less urgent because the survivors themselves will all be dead.

Many of the *halmonis* have said they do not want to die until they receive an official and legal apology from the Japanese government, Yoon said. However, progress on the issue with the Japanese has been slow, and the survivors die at a faster rate each year. It is some comfort that the movement still has considerable support and momentum, perhaps enough to outlive the survivors themselves. With confidence and sadness, Yoon said, "When all the *halmonis* die, this movement will continue, but the contents of the movement will be different." ●

To go on a scheduled visit to The House of Sharing, email them at sharinghouse@gmail.com, or see the website: www.comfort-women.wordpress.com or www.nanum.org.

To join the former comfort women and supporters at the Wednesday noon weekly demonstration in front of the Japanese Embassy, go to the purple Subway line 6, Gwanghwamun station. A map at the subway station shows the location of the Japanese Embassy, located near to the American Embassy.