

it back to Korea from where they were abandoned after the war.

The House of Sharing was created to provide a home for the survivors who are from a variety of circumstances — abandoned by families ashamed of the association with victims; exiles who returned to Korea after more than 50 years to learn they had no family left; women who needed the companionship and solace that only other survivors could understand and provide; women whose bodies bore the ravages of constant rape, infection and disease, who needed care for chronic health problems.

A GARDENER

Currently The House of Sharing is home to nine *halmonis*, all in their 70s and 80s. White gravel paves the driveway and the paths that connect the buildings. To the right, just beyond the complex is a field that has been turned into a garden, filled with vegetables — beans, corn, cabbage, onions, peppers and lettuce.

This is where Soon Duk Kim, 82, spends part of each morning, weeding and watering the tender plants. The garden is one of her passions. Shortly after the visitors arrived in the van, they walked to the garden with Soon Duk. Through the Korean translator, Soon Duk described what is growing in each section of the large garden. She wore an oversized straw hat to shield her face from the bright sun.

As she walked up and down the cultivated rows, she occasionally leaned over to pluck a weed or gently touch a plant for emphasis. The strawberry plants are nearly finished for the season, and Soon Duk apologized for not having any left for the visitors to taste. But she inspected the plants and found a small berry that she handed to *KQ's* photographer. When they came to the ruffled lettuce she crouched and plucked a handful to take back to the kitchen. They bristled from her hand like a big green bouquet as she leisurely walked the gravel path to the main house.

As Soon Duk walked, she passed a sculpture centered in the wide courtyard. It is the figure of a young Korean girl dressed in a



simple *hanbok*, her long straight hair pulled back into a ponytail. Her hands are at her sides and she gazes toward a neighbor's farm field, across the courtyard. She stands next to a closed flower stalk.

The sculpture is called *Unblossomed Flower*.

TRUTH UNCOVERED

The Japanese military sexual slavery system first came to light in 1990 when an Ewha Women's University professor, Chung Ok Yune, published her research of the sexual slavery system. With several other scholars and advocates, Yune founded an organization (Korean Council for the Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery by Japan), which called for former comfort women to come forward and tell their stories. In 1991, former comfort woman Hak Soon Kim was the first to publicly identify herself as a military sexual slave. Emboldened by her example, other *halmonis*, from Korea, and other Japanese-occupied countries, stepped forward too.

In 1992, a home called the House of Sharing was established in Sokyo-dong, Seoul for the aging comfort women who were destitute, without family support and needed housing and medical care. In 1995, the current facility was built in Kwangju (near Seoul).

Many of the women were from peasant families, and never learned to read and write. It was thought that perhaps art would enable the *halmonis* to express the shame, anger, and outrage they felt and continue to feel. Many of the women, including Soon Duk Kim,



(top) "Manum Chip" The House of Sharing, *Unblossomed Flower* sculpture in front. (above) *Halmoni* Ok Yun Park with daughter Myoung Ok Im, who works at the House of Sharing as a cook.

participated in the art therapy program. In recent years, her work has gained recognition for its raw emotion. She has traveled around the world with an exhibition of her work and the work of other former comfort women. Her lively personality has made her somewhat of a celebrity on media tours and exhibitions. The sculpture *Unblossomed Flower* is inspired by her painting of the same name.

Soon Duk invited her guests into her room, fitted with a dresser, and a dorm-sized refrigerator. There is a large clock, a calendar, a low table with a small red plastic vanity mirror, and a collection of framed photographs. Two tall wood cabinets along a wall provide storage for bedding and clothing. There is a small folded quilt on the floor, a pillow and on another small table, a handbag.

Before Soon Duk begins the interview, a nurse takes her blood pressure and administers a diabetes injection. The interview is aided by a translator.

THE RIGHT AGE

Soon Duk began by describing her family; parents and five siblings - two older brothers, an older sister and a younger sister. She was 16 when her family agreed to let her go to Japan for work. She remembered that the Japanese selected one girl from each family in her community. Soon Duk was selected because she was the right age, the Japanese said.

Instead, she was taken by boat to Shanghai, China. She and the 50 other Korean girls, ages 15 to 17, had no idea where they were going or why. They were miserable with seasickness. They reassured one another with stories about their families and their homes. During one portion of the trip, they passed through Nanking and glimpsed of the infamous massacre.

When they finally arrived in Shanghai the girls were separated and placed into individual rooms. Still, they had no idea what was in store for them. Sook Duk

remembered seeing a long line of Japanese soldiers lined up outside the rooms. It wasn't long before she and the other girls realized why they had been brought to the Japanese military camp. The men came into their small rooms, one by one, and raped them.

The girls were shocked. Some cried, others screamed or fainted, Soon Duk said. Some of the girls tried to run away but were caught and hanged, killed as examples to the other girls. Even if Soon Duk had managed to escape, she had no idea where she was in China, and had no money to return to Korea. Soon Duk was in the comfort station for three years. All she could do was survive, she said, and think of returning to Korea someday.

Soon Duk knew that she was pretty and clever. Eventually, she befriended a Japanese officer who was sympathetic to her. She used her friendship with him to complain that she was injured and bleeding from being raped so often. He arranged it so that she could obtain the official papers which would allow her to return to Korea. This was still before the Japanese entered World War II with the U.S., Soon Duk remembered. Three other girls found ways to leave the camp with her.

When she finally returned to Seoul, she told no one what had happened to her in the previous three years. It was her secret. Eventually, Soon-duk married a Korean man. They had five children, a girl and four boys.

Soon Duk never told anyone about what happened to her — she said she had worked in a Japanese factory. Ten years ago, Soon Duk finally came forward to speak out about Japanese military sexual slavery. Like many of the other former comfort women, she had heard about Hak Soon Kim, the first woman to go public with her story of being forced into sexual slavery by the Japanese army.

She decided that she had to speak out but waited until her husband's death to spare him. She waited an additional three months, and then asked her cousin and a niece what to do. They both advised her to stay silent. On her own, she decided she had to come forward.

"This wasn't just my problem," Soon-duk said. "I had to let people know what the Japanese had done