

to Korean girls.” Her son learned of Soon Duk’s story when he saw her interviewed on television.

At first he asked, “How could you do that?” But he changed his mind when he realized what his mother had been through as a young woman and how her life ever since had been difficult, she said. Eventually, he supported her decision.

“This wasn’t your fault,” he told her. “Japan was the government at the time. It was the Japanese government’s fault.”

The Japanese government should tell the truth and admit what happened during the war, Soon Duk said. It should ask the surviving comfort women for their forgiveness. She said that she “holds nothing against the current Japanese people because they too were never told what happened before and during World War II.”

She has visited with the many Japanese who have come to visit the House of Sharing to apologize and ask for forgiveness, she said. “The people of Japan have warm hearts. But their government should tell the truth.”

HEALING WITH ART

Ever since she came to live at the House of Sharing, Soon Duk has told her story verbally and through visual art. She began painting as part of the art therapy program when she lived in the temporary location in Seoul (*see related story Fall 1999 issue of Korean Quarterly*). One day, a Japanese representative came to visit the women and saw the artwork. The representative suggested that the women use their artwork to make postcards that could be sold to raise funds to build a permanent House of Sharing.

The funds from art sales, financial support from the Chogyee Buddhist sect, the Korean government and private donations financed the current House of Sharing campus and History Museum of the Military Sexual Slavery by Japan.

While Soon Duk said she is still unable to find words to express many of her feelings about Japan, she was able to convey it in art. Her most powerful image is her painting of a knife stabbing the Japanese flag in its red center,



Buddhist nun Mil Bum walks in the courtyard with halmoni Ok Yun Park. The museum is in the background.

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that drips with blood. The image was so controversial that organizers were reluctant to display it. When representatives from Japan saw it, they asked how much money she would take for it. She refused to sell it. Instead, it is displayed in the museum.

The History Museum of the Military Sexual Slavery by Japan, constructed on the House of Sharing complex, opened in 1998. The museum is designed in a semi-circle around a small circular stone plaza. The entrance and the exit are built above ground and face each other across the plaza.

Visitors enter the museum through large double doors decorated with an elaborate metal sculpture depicting a young Korean woman. Once through the doors, the museum’s exhibits and artwork line a corridor that slowly descends into the lower museum area, located under the plaza. The physical sensation of going underground into the dim light of the museum, combined with the naïve but powerful paintings created by the comfort women creates claustrophobia and a sense of entrapment.

Maps and legends also line the walls, showing the extensive comfort station network throughout Japanese-occupied in Southeast Asia, China and the Pacific. Grainy photographs show the women in the camps, Japanese soldiers standing in line, the rooms that the women lived in and the conditions of the camps.

A multi-media wall incorporates the photographs of the women

who have stepped forward and provided testimony about the comfort stations. Another wall holds plaster casts of the halmoni’s hands. Visitors are encouraged to fit their hands into the impressions, a way to connect to the women whose stories have been revealed.

There is an exhibit — a recreated room where the women lived. In it there is only a narrow cot, a basin and rag.

Then the corridor ascends and the space is filled with natural light. The sense of relief is palpable and there is an impulse to exhale deeply, to rid one’s body of the overpowering weight of sadness. At the exit, visitors once again go through a set of double doors, these emblazoned with a metal sculpture of an elderly woman.

LIFE AT MANUM CHIP

Du Ree Park is 80 years old. She has just returned from a visit with her daughter who lives nearby. She is speaking angrily, in Korean. Jong-seon, the House of Sharing nurse, explained that Du Ree’s daughter is getting a divorce, and the visit has upset her. Jong-seon gently seats Du Ree at the kitchen table and takes her blood pressure. It is high and Jong Seon gives her medicine. She does not want to eat lunch. Jong Seon comforts her and escorts her to her room upstairs.

From the living room, several of the elderly women can be heard talking and laughing. They are teasing Do Ri Gi. Do Ri was kidnapped as a young teen and taken to a Japanese comfort station in China. She

remained in China after the war. She forgot her Korean, and for most of her adult life has spoken Chinese.

While the other women talk and gossip, Do Ri sits quietly, unsmiling. Although she has returned to her homeland after so many years, she remains a stranger. Language isolates her.

She recently had her white hair cut into a short bob. The other women still tease her about the haircut. One of the women walks up from behind, ruffling the short hair on her neck. Do Ri brushes the woman’s hand away angrily and turns from the group.

A Korean language teacher from the nearby town is seated in the living room with the elderly women. The teacher visits the House of Sharing twice a week, teaching the women *hangul* and how to write their names in Korean. The teacher points to Do Ri and remarks that Do Ri is her best student.

The *halmonis* spend a lot of their time in the living room, watching Korean television that includes “doo-rah-mas” (dramas or Korean soap operas), game shows, infomercials and recently, World Cup soccer. A young female monk named Mil Bum is seated with them, listening to the conversation and providing companionship.

Kwang Sunihm, the Buddhist monk who is the House of Sharing’s director, said that the women are free to pursue any of their interests. Several of them go into town by van several times a week to shop. Soon Duk keeps busy with her gar-

den. Other women prefer to sit in their rooms or outside, quiet and reserved. While they all go to their rooms in the early evening, they don’t sleep. Some stay up late, listening to their radios and televisions alone, throughout the night.

Ok Sun Lee, age 76, has a second-floor room with a Western-style bed. Her room, like Soon Duk’s is filled with photographs and personal items. Her guests seat themselves on the floor near the bed to listen to her story.

Ok Sun was born and raised in Pusan, in a poor family of 12 children. She was 15-years-old when the Japanese took her.

Ok Sun had been a housekeeper. One day, while on an errand, Japanese soldiers kidnapped her. Her family never knew what had happened to her.

She was taken by train to China, to an area just north of Korea. There were six other girls with her. Once they arrived at their destination, they were put into a jail cell. They didn’t know they were in China, and they had no idea what the Japanese were going to do with them.

First, she was put to work at an airfield which was under construction. She and other young women cleared grass for an area that would be an airstrip. The girls were poorly fed, and when Ok Sun demanded more food, she was beaten.

Eventually, she was placed in a Japanese comfort station where she was raped repeatedly. She was so young at the time; she hadn’t even gotten her first period. Some of the women tried to escape, after which an electric fence was installed around the compound.

Sundays were the worst days, she said. There were long lines of men, 30 to 40, waiting at one time. When the girls complained, the soldiers cut them with knives. Ok Sun pulled up the sleeve of her blouse to show the long scar she has on her arm.

The soldiers also kicked and slapped the girls, often so severely that their skin tore. Ok Sun looked for opportunities to kill herself. She didn’t have money to buy poison. During her years at the comfort station, she and the others lived on grains and grass. By the time the war ended, she had lost her teeth and had problems with her hearing.