

After the war she remained in China. After Japan was defeated Ok Sun walked away from the camp with seven other women. Once they arrived in a Chinese town, they split up. But she didn't return to Korea because she had no money and she was too ashamed to face her family. She eventually settled in a mountain community and there married a widower. She raised the children from his first marriage. After 58 years in China, she returned to South Korea in 1996.

During that visit, she spent a night at the House of Sharing. She told the director she would like to return and live there when her husband died. After her return in 2000, she set about locating her surviving siblings, but were told they were dead. Other family documents recorded that she, too, had died.

When she finally located her family, she learned that not only that her parents had died, but that seven brothers and sisters had also died in the intervening years. "I could never see my parents again," Ok Sun said. "That's why it hurts even more."

She eventually found an older brother. It was bittersweet. When they reunited, he didn't recognize her or remember what they did as children. She also found two younger brothers, and two younger sisters. The youngest brother, 57, wasn't even born when she was kidnapped.

"I cannot forget what happened to me," Ok Sun said. "The world should not forget what happened to these young girls." The survivors of the comfort women system, and their supporters, have demonstrated weekly and spoken out publicly for more than 10 years, she pointed out, not for compensation, but for an apology from their former oppressors.

Before Ok Sun dies, she wants it made clear to the world what Japan did to her and the other former comfort women. For that reason she is learning Japanese so she can speak directly to Japanese visitors who come to visit the House of Sharing and the History Museum.

Korean human rights groups have appealed to the United States, Ok Sun said, but the U.S. doesn't care what happened. "And our South Korean government is weak and unable to force Japan to admit its crime.



"That's why the surviving women still protest at the Japanese Embassy in Seoul every Wednesday noon," she said. "We are not afraid. We have a really strong will."

SOME JEALOUSIES

The women are up early. Today is Wednesday and they will be leaving at 10 a.m. for downtown Seoul.

Loud voices suddenly erupt from one of the women's rooms. Several women are shouting, doors slam, and there is weeping. Later, our translator Kong Sook, explains what happened.

One of the *halmonis*, Do Soon Han, was getting dressed, assisted by one of the volunteers. The volunteer pulled open one of the dresser drawers and saw that the sock and underwear drawer was in a confusing jumble. She and another volunteer began reorganizing and refolding the items in the drawer. Another *halmoni* saw what they were doing, and, in a fit of jealousy, sobbed and cried, "Why do you pay so much attention to her?" Upset, Do-soon shouted back at her and they began to argue. The energetic director, Kwang Sunihm, finally intervened and spoke sharply to both women. Chastened they quieted down and returned to their own rooms.

The House of Sharing has provided a haven for former comfort women to live out their remaining lives in relative calm and comfort, and in a loving, respectful atmosphere. But it still doesn't prevent the elderly women from creating their own cliques and pecking orders.

Soon Duk knows that many of the women are jealous that she has traveled overseas and to the U.S. to promote the former comfort women's art exhibits. She is a celebrity of sorts, and the press often speaks to her when it comes to visit the museum.

"Everyone's personality here is different," she said. "There are jealousies and conflicts."

WEEKLY MISSION

The elderly women are assisted onto the bus. Eight of them will go to the Japanese Embassy for the weekly protest. The women have put on fresh blouses, skirts and pants. They sit quietly. Occasionally, one of the women will reach over and pat another's hand. The van driver plays a cassette of Korean folk music and *pongchak*. During one lively song, the women sing along with the driver and clap their hands.

When the van pulls up to the Japanese Embassy in Seoul, there is a contingent of foreign press and television cameras on hand to greet them. The World Cup soccer championships are being held throughout South Korea and Japan for the next three or four weeks.

Among the stories the foreign press is covering during its stay is the weekly protest of the former comfort women. The demonstration is the longest continuing protest on record, and has become well known for this



(top) Gum Joo Hwang confronts a Japanese official in front of the Japanese embassy and (above) shows her sorrow during the weekly comfort women vigil at the Japanese embassy.

PHOTOGRAPH BY STEPHEN WUNROW

fact alone. Since 1992, the women and their supporters have come to the Japanese Embassy every Wednesday, every week of the year, where they stand and sit for one hour. The peaceful demonstrations feature speeches, songs and placards.

The sun at midday is hot and the air is humid. Some of the women wait in the van, doors open, not wanting to get out until it is closer to noon. The *Discovery Channel* film crew film the women when they finally disembark, stepping carefully from the van, walking slowly past the cameramen, unsmiling, looking straight ahead, allowing only their dignified straight backs to convey the gravity of their mission.

They assemble on the sidewalk across the street from the Japanese Embassy. It is a nondescript red brick building with a purposeful dis-

creteness to its design, as if it does not want to draw attention to itself. A number of shiny black diplomat-type cars enter and exit a driveway partially hidden behind an iron gate.

About a dozen *halmonis* sit on plastic folding chairs that young organizers have unloaded from vans and set up for them. They put on the yellow aprons that identify them and their cause, and place their handbags underneath the chairs. Their supporters, organizers from local community groups, human rights organizations, religious groups, churches and schools, stand behind and next to them. Most appear to be high school students like Ji-seon Cho from Hanam High School who is there with several of her classmates.

Facing the demonstrators, with their backs to the Embassy entrance, are two to three dozen South Korean riot police, many of them just barely out of their teens. They stand at attention in a double row. Their presence sends a very visual message that the demonstration is being accommodated only at the pleasure of the authorities and within very strict parameters.

Throughout the demonstration, office workers from nearby buildings walk past on their lunch hours, barely looking at the commotion. A few stop to take in the large number of foreign press, mostly male, easily identified by their fair complexions, tall, gangly bodies, baggy shorts and sneakers, and fuzzy microphone booms.

The demonstration is orderly and uneventful until the last 10 minutes. One *halmoni* becomes angered that a Japanese embassy official, watching from the sidewalk, had been smiling and joking to his colleagues during the speeches and songs. She swiftly approaches him and begins to berate him in Korean. He smiles and walks away from her. She follows, holding her handbag tightly in one hand and using the other to fist the air.

She starts to point her finger at his chest when a group of students join the woman and begin to gently pull her away. She struggles away, continuing to shout. Finally, spent with emotion, she collapses in the street in tears, surrounded by young people who try to comfort her, then slowly lift her to her feet and lead her away. Across the street, the young riot police officers stare straight ahead. ●