

Painting for All Beings

by Annette Herskovits

Kim Soon Duk, 80 years old and slight, walks with a vigorous step from painting to painting, explaining their meaning in a forceful voice. A young Korean American woman interprets for us.

These are pictures of her childhood in Korea. This white thatched-roof house surrounded by trees and farm animals is her home. Here she is, picking mushrooms in the woods—but this choice food was for the Japanese: Korea was their colony, and they took so many of the crops that she was always hungry.

Her parents were very poor and as a child she worked like an ox. She is the girl in this green field studded with flowers; the large brown ox head next to her is her ox self.

In this picture, a Japanese soldier, having grabbed the arm of a Korean maiden, is taking her across the sky and the ocean, away from the blooming land of Korea. The woman's face is full of fear.

In 1937, Soon Duk, then 16, signed up for factory work in Japan. She sailed with 50 other Korean girls—here they are, huddled together in their white shirts and black skirts on one side of the ship, with the Japanese soldiers on the other side. But the ship did not go to Japan; it went to Shanghai, where the fighting between Chinese and Japanese forces turned the water in the harbor red with blood. The Korean women were terrified, Soon Duk tells us. They were taken to a “comfort station”—a brothel for Japanese troops.

When hundreds of soldiers lined up outside the building, the women ran around crying. Then the soldiers came in. Here is Soon Duk, naked, huddled on the floor, her face hidden in her hands, shaking with fear as three uniformed men loom

over her. “Like monsters,” she says to us now, gesturing toward identical faces with small mouths and dead eyes.

For three years, she had to “serve” 30 to 40 men a day. Some women committed suicide—Soon Duk tried twice. Most women became sick with venereal diseases and when they did not get better, they disappeared.

Soon Duk was taken from Shanghai to Nanking with the advancing Japanese troops and witnessed the orgy of killing now called the Rape of Nanking.

Finally, ill and bleeding severely, she confided in a high-ranking Japanese officer that she and four friends wanted to kill themselves. Somehow, he procured the papers they needed to return to Korea. Unlike most comfort women, who were sexual slaves until the war ended, she returned home in 1940.

The women who returned home found neither consolation nor support. Most were ill and destitute. Fearful of society's condemnation, they kept silent about their experience. They felt aversion for men and most were unable to bear children.

Soon Duk went to her village, but she felt shame: “My conscience did not allow me to stay with my mother at home.” She went to Seoul, where life was difficult but she was able to support herself as a housekeeper and through small business ventures. Then she lived with a man and raised their three children, although they never married. She did not speak of her years as a comfort woman for a long, long time.

In 1991, Kim Soon Duk saw a former comfort woman tell her story on television. She wanted to testify too, but her family objected. Then she heard that the Japanese government was claiming that the women had turned to prostitution of their own free will. Soon Duk could not sleep for many nights. Finally, she decided to speak out.

But because her family disapproved, she had to leave home. She lived alone until she met Heijin Sunim, a Buddhist monk who directs the House of Sharing, where former comfort women live together. There she found understanding and friendship.

When Heijin Sunim asked what they would like to do, the women asked to study—something they had never had a chance to do. Among the volunteer teachers was an art teacher, and the “grandmothers,” as visitors and friends affectionately call them, started to paint. Three years later, an exhibit of their work toured Japan, and the grandmothers received 2,000 letters from Japanese people, most of them expressing sympathy and support. The exhibit toured North

Soon-Duk Kim,
“Stolen Away in a Ship,”
acrylic on paper



America in the fall of 2000.

An estimated 200,000 women were sexually enslaved by the Japanese military, about 80 percent of them Korean, the rest from other Asian countries occupied by Japan. Army documents referred to the women as “military supplies.”

Physical violence beyond the repeated sexual assault was constant. One woman told of a soldier beating her after she started shaking from a malaria attack during intercourse. Another told of guards bringing a very sick comfort woman in front of a group of newly arrived women and shooting her dead to show what would happen if they disobeyed. Some women were forced to watch while the Japanese decapitated hundreds of Chinese prisoners. Some were forced to participate.

There is no way to know how many died. Many were killed by Japanese troops as they retreated in defeat or were abandoned in the midst of battle.

And yet, a few Japanese men acted compassionately. One soldier would sit quietly in the room with the woman when his turn came and then just leave. One carefully washed the pus and blood from the woman’s private parts and left.

The women who returned to Korea received no medical, psychological, or material help from the Korean government. Korea did not include compensation for comfort women in its negotiations with Japan about reparations, and the final 1965 treaty makes no mention of them. Nor did the comfort women figure in the Tokyo war crimes trials held by the Allies after the war.

The women’s story all but disappeared—except in their own memories—for 40 years. Then, in the late 1980s, Korean women organizing to protest the growing “sex tour” industry learned the history of comfort women. In 1990, 37 Korean women’s organizations formally asked the Japanese government to admit to the crime, apologize, and compensate the victims.

Japan responded that private operators, not the army, had recruited the women and operated the stations. Moreover, the women joined willingly, attracted by the good money they could make. Thus there were no grounds for an apology. This so angered a former comfort woman, Kim Hak Soon, that she agreed to testify publicly in August 1991. That December, she and two other women sued the Japanese government.

Then a Japanese historian unearthed documents proving irrefutably that the Japanese military had set up and run the comfort stations. The government issued public apologies, but the apologies were thin. The government expressed “regret” and “remorse” but never acknowledged any crime and refused to pay compensa-

tion. In 1994, it established a nongovernmental foundation to provide payments to the victims—but only with private funds. To the women, this implied, insultingly, that they were entitled to charity, but not to redress from the state. Most refused that money.

A U.N. Commission on Human Rights report published in 1996 concluded that the government’s use of comfort women was a clear case of slavery and called on Japan to pay compensation to victims and to punish those responsible. The Japanese government rejected these conclusions and continues to deny that its actions violated international law. Japanese courts have ruled against former comfort women in every suit brought against the government—including a Tokyo High Court ruling against 18 Filipino women in December 2000, claiming the statute of limitations applied.

Japanese history textbooks either fail to mention comfort women or obscure their actual function by using the term *teshintai*, which referred to the wartime Women’s Labor Service Corps.

Only two of the paintings by the former comfort women show their captors being punished. It did not surprise me that the desire to retaliate was a rare theme in the women’s paintings. In the many fantasies I had as a child about the Nazi soldiers who murdered my parents, none involved revenge or punishment. Instead, I imagined myself pleading with the murderers: “We are ordinary, even rather good human beings: there is nothing evil or vile about us. Open your eyes and see. See the harm you have done.”

Maybe this peaceable approach only reflected my sense of powerlessness, but I think I also understood that these other beings had an independent will and mind. So I desperately wanted these frighteningly free minds to acknowledge my parents, my brother, my sister, and myself as full human beings, to see what they had wrought and to express deep remorse. I do not recall any resolution of this imaginary debate; rather, the scene would dissolve, leaving me in a state of anxious uncertainty.

But if the perpetrators of atrocities keep denying or belittling the pain they have caused, the victim may be moved to speak up out of a sense of responsibility toward all human beings, including herself. Kim Hak Soon, the first former comfort woman to testify publicly, said: “What prompted me to come out publicly were the lies by Japan... [They] hurt my insides, heart and mind. I said to myself, ‘Why does not someone stop them? Someone has to stop the lies.’”

Speaking up may involve anger. In one of her forms, Avalokiteshvara, the Bodhisattva of compassion, has 11 faces. Some have the lovely smile of unmitigated kindness, but others are distorted by wrath. Wrath is one tool Avalokiteshvara uses to awaken the deluded, the

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Soon-Duk Kim,
“In that Place, at that
Moment in Time,”
acrylic on paper

deniers, the complacent—to make them see and hear what they strive not to know, to make them remember what they wish to erase from their own memory and the memory of others. One former comfort woman expressed the true, compassionate intent of her anger, saying, “If Emperor Akihito said: ‘It was a crime committed by my father [Hirohito, emperor during the war]. Please forgive me!’ I would say: ‘I understand.’”

Speaking up demands that one re-experience the terror of the past, bring forth true and skillful language, and confront the resistance of listeners. Each step is a struggle against fear, a step that cannot be sustained for oneself alone. But a

force outside the small self—the many voices of the dead, the living, and those to be born—rises from the unconscious and urges one on.

Soon Duk said: “The process of painting...reminded me of that horrible past experience...I was going crazy again, possessed by nightmares about the past. I couldn’t sleep; sometimes I screamed.” Yet she kept calling up the past into her mind and body so as to speak to others through her paintings.

The willingness of others to see and listen, their support and loving attention, are crucial in this process.

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When I sought help from Buddhist teachers in coping with my past as a Holocaust survivor, they assumed that hatred and the inability to forgive were principal causes of my abiding grief. But this is off the mark—although I have seen survivors of massive atrocities express hatred and a desire for revenge, for most, these feelings, if present at all, were secondary to the sense of very deep, perhaps irreparable loss.

There is a fundamental difference between being the victim of an individual criminal and being the victim of a murderous, totalitarian society driven by an ideology of superiority and contempt. In the latter case, the scope and cruelty of the offenses are so extreme that all humanity is tainted. Trust in one’s fellow human beings—which should be as basic and natural as expecting solid ground to hold your step—breaks down. More than anger and blame, the victims come to know fear and hopelessness.

So, for the victims, forgiveness is not the issue. The only path to recovery is to reweave the fabric of human love, a collective task that is never done, like the bodhisattva’s vow to save all beings. It is a matter of kindness, of letting the victims speak out, of listen-

ing to them with deep enough attention to truly grasp the horror, of helping the victims restore their sense of worth and dignity, of providing needed material help and a safe environment. The task in the larger world is to make the truth widely known and to expose the guilty; to teach about the ravages of prejudice and collective delusions of grandeur; and to build a body of international law that clearly labels the violations as crimes. And most essential, but rarest, is for the perpetrators to admit to their crimes, experience remorse, and atone.

Thus the healing of the victims and the mending of the human world are one unending process.

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The sufferings of the comfort women were long ignored, not least because of the inferior status of women. Then the rise of women’s movements began the work of restorative justice, and last February, mass sexual rape became one of the legally recognized “crimes against humanity”—one of the most serious human rights violations, along with genocide. Rape can no longer be dismissed as “normal” behavior in times of war, an argument that has been used by many Japanese who oppose apologies or compensation.

But most perpetrators will never repent, and it is hard to imagine what would constitute reconciliation with their victims. It is almost impossible to admit to monstrous deeds, as such an admission demands a complete denial of one’s sense of self. The vast majority of Germans who had been enthusiastic Nazis and anti-Semites evaded even the possibility of repentance by claiming they had either never known of Nazi atrocities or had acted under orders. Only in the next generation did significant numbers of people appear who were willing and able to take on the burden of their history. The young Japanese, too, appear ready to listen when given the chance to learn about their true history.

Finally, the victims, imprinted so deeply in body and mind, will never be completely healed. Kim Hak Soon spoke of being full of *han* (bitterness): “This tight knot of *han* was only made tighter by the fight [against the Japanese government]. I can hardly breathe.” This is not a stubborn nursing of grievances, but rather a sorrowful questioning about the human capacity to willfully inflict immense suffering on others and to obstruct beneficial change through continuing denial. All who listen to the women’s story also feel this “knot of *han*.”

From time to time the burden may lighten, as when Kim Soon Duk, gracefully sitting in a chair with one knee up in the pose of royal ease, and the Buddhist monk Heijin Sunim share laughter, and Soon Duk’s wrinkled and lovely face expresses pure and trusting merriment. ❖

(See page 45 for note on Annette Herskovits.)

These paintings are reproduced in the extraordinary book *Unblossomed Flower, A Collection of Paintings by Former Military Comfort Women*, published by The Historical Museum of Sexual Slavery by the Japanese Military. To obtain the book, write to: 65 Wondang-ri, Twaechon-myun, Kwangju-kun, Kyonggi-do Province, Republic of Korea, or e-mail: <y365@Chollian.net>