

Suharti, an Indonesian survivor

Personal Information

- 1) Date of Birth: 28 Desember 1927 (Identification card)
- 2) Date of Death: 26 Agustus 2018.
- 3) Place of birth : Blitar, East Java

References

- 1) Interviewer : Koichi Kimura
- 2) Place of Interview : Yogyakarta, Central Java
- 3) Year of interview : March 25, 1996
- 4) Recording Form : Tape Recording
- 5) Editor of Interview : Eka Hindrati
- 6) Translator : Koichi Kimura
- 7) Photographer : Meichi Sitorus

Background information provided by Akihisa Matsuno:

Indonesia was a Dutch colony and was called the Netherlands East Indies. Japan invaded Indonesia in 1942 and occupied her for three and a half years. The purpose was to obtain petroleum that Japan desperately needed to continue its war against the Allies. The Netherlands was a member of the Allies, and the Japanese military interned Dutch citizens in camps. Meanwhile Japan promised with Indonesian nationalists to grant independence, and mobilized Indonesians for its war efforts under its imperialist slogan of the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere. Millions were recruited as romusha or forced laborers and were sent to various places in Asia occupied by Japan for hard work. Many died overseas. The military also set up comfort stations wherever its troops were stationed. Korean, Indonesian and Dutch women were confined in those comfort stations. After the war, when they returned to the community that was patriarchal and religiously strict, they were sometimes not admitted. In such a case, they had to live a lonely life in poverty throughout their life.

During Japan's colonization [of Indonesia], one day in 1944, all parents in my village were ordered to gather at the village hall. The village officer was looking for children, girls and boys, who were more than fifteen years old. These children had to register their names in the village office. This order came from the Japanese army.

My father was a farmer. I had seven brothers and sisters, and I was the third child. My father was called by the village chief, who told my father, "Your daughter will be educated at school in [the city of] Banjarmasin [in Kalimantan, Borneo island], and after graduation, she can work in an office." My father refused and said, "I will not let my children go away to school. So please do not take her." But the village chief, insisted. "If you won't let her go to school, then she can train to learn to be a housemaid," he said. My father replied, "Village chief sir, please do not bother with my child." Then the village chief got angry and said, "Each village has been given quotas to fulfill, so you must give her [over]."

I was fifteen years old at the time, so I was chosen automatically. In all, four girls were chosen from my region. The others were the same age as me, and we went through the same procedure. We boarded a truck and went to [the city of] Surabaya together with a group of young men. They probably had been drafted to be *romusha* [laborers for the Japanese military]. But I did not yet understand why the four of us had been chosen from among so many other girls. From Surabaya, we were put on a big Japanese ship, on which I saw many Japanese soldiers. We boarded this ship, named *Otongaru*, which departed for Balikpapan.

When we arrived at Balikpapan, we were taken to a place that was like a restaurant. After a while, we were picked up by a truck that was escorted by three soldiers, who sat next to the driver. From there, we were taken to a dormitory-like house in a district that was called Gunung Malang. It was a simple building made of bamboo and consisted of about thirty rooms.

We were not paid anything while we worked there. Even the meals were meager, mixed with some brown rice, so we always felt hungry. My first client was a civilian named Ono, who worked at an oil company. He stayed with me for one week, so I did not have other clients. He came every night, but after one week, he suddenly disappeared.

It was only afterwards that I realized I had to “serve” many Japanese men who called on me. They were both soldiers and army civilian employees. For the next six months, I had to “serve” seven to twelve guests every day. When the Allied forces bombed the Japanese Army in Balikpapan, we ran from Balikpapan to [the city of] Banjarmasin. We finally arrived at Banjarmasin after a journey that took 50 days, through forests and jungles. It was there that I met Mrs. Mardiyem. I worked at Terawang in order to survive, until the Japanese Army was defeated and returned to their country.