

Jan Ruff O'Herne, An Australian survivor from Dutch East Indies

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About Jan Ruff O'Herne:

Jan O'Herne was born in 1923 in the Dutch East Indies, a former Southeast Asian colony of the Dutch Empire. The Japanese captured the Dutch East Indies in 1942 and occupied it until 1944. They imprisoned all people of Dutch nationality in prisoner-of-war camps. In her testimony, O'Herne describes her experiences both as a "comfort woman", and as a lifelong advocate for obtaining a formal apology from the Japanese government for their crimes against humanity.

The Forgotten Ones

I was born in Java, in the former Dutch East Indies (now known as Indonesia) in 1923 of a fourth generation Dutch colonial family. I grew up on a sugar plantation and had the most wonderful childhood. I was educated in Catholic schools and graduated from Franciscan Teacher's College in Semarang, Java.

When I was 19 years old in 1942, Japanese troops invaded Java. Together with thousands of women and children, I was interned in a Japanese prison camp for three and a half years. Many stories have been told about the horrors, brutalities, suffering and starvation of Dutch women in Japanese prison camps. But one story was never told, the most shameful story of the worst human rights abuse committed by the Japanese during World War II: The story of the "Comfort Women," the *jugun ianfu*, and how these women were forcibly seized against their will, to provide sexual services for the Japanese Imperial Army.

I had been in the camp for two years, when in 1944 high ranking Japanese officers arrived at the camp. The order was given: all single girls from seventeen years up, had to line up in the compound. The officers walked towards us, and a selection process began. They paced up and down the line, eyeing us up and down, looking at our figures, at our legs, lifting our chins. They selected ten pretty girls. I was one of ten. We were told to come forward, and pack a small bag, as we were to be taken away. The whole camp protested, and our mothers tried to pull us back. I embraced my mother not knowing if I was ever going to see her again. We were hurled into an army truck. We were terrified and clung to our bags and to each other.

The truck stopped in the city of Semarang, in front of a large Dutch Colonial house. We were told to get out. Entering the house we soon realized what sort of a house it was. A Japanese military told us that we were here for the sexual pleasure of the Japanese. The house was a brothel.

We protested loudly. We said we were forced to come here, against our will. That they had no right to do this to us, and that it was against the Geneva Convention. But they just laughed at us and said that they could do with us as they liked. We were given Japanese names and these were put on our bedroom doors.

We were a very innocent generation. I knew nothing about sex. The horrific memories of

“opening night” of the brothel have tortured my mind all my life. We were told to go to the dining room, and we huddled together in fear, as we saw the house filling up with military. I got out my prayer book, and led the girls in prayer, in the hope that this would help us. Then they started to drag us away, one by one. I could hear the screaming coming from the bedrooms. I hid under the table, but was soon found. I fought him. I kicked him with all my might. The Japanese officer became very angry because I would not give myself to him. He took his sword out of its scabbard and pointed it at me, threatening me with it, that he would kill me if I did not give into him. I curled myself into a corner, like a hunted animal that could not escape. I made him understand that I was not afraid to die. I pleaded with him to allow me to say some prayers. While I was praying he started to undress himself. He had no intention of killing me. I would have been no good to him dead. He then threw me on the bed and ripped off all my clothes. He ran his sword all over my naked body, and played with me as a cat would with a mouse. I still tried to fight him, but he thrust himself on top of me, pinning me down under his heavy body. The tears were streaming down my face as he raped me in a most brutal way. I thought he would never stop.

When he eventually left the room, my whole body was shaking. I gathered up what was left of my clothing, and fled into the bathroom. There I found some of the other girls. We were all crying, and in total shock. In the bathroom I tried to wash away all the dirt and the shame off my body. Just wash it away. But the night was not over yet, there were more Japanese waiting, and this went on all night, it was only the beginning, week after week, month after month.

The house was completely guarded, there was no way to escape. At times I tried to hide, but was always found, and dragged back to my room. I tried everything, I even cut off all my hair, so I was totally bald. I thought if I made myself look ugly, nobody would want me. But it turned me into a curiosity object; they all wanted the girl that had cut off her hair. It had the opposite effect.

Never did any Japanese rape me without a fight. I fought each one of them. Therefore, I was repeatedly beaten. In the so-called “Comfort Station” I was systematically beaten and raped day and night. Even the Japanese doctor raped me each time he visited the brothel to examine us for venereal disease. And to humiliate us even more the doors and windows were left open, so the Japanese could watch us being examined.

During the time in the “Comfort Station,” the Japanese had abused me and humiliated me. I was left with a body that was torn and fragmented everywhere. The Japanese soldiers had ruined my young life. They had stripped me of everything. They had taken away my youth, my self-esteem, my dignity, my freedom, my possessions, and my family. But there was one thing that they could never take away from me. It was my religious faith and love for God. This was mine and nobody could take that away from me. It was my deep Faith that helped me survive all that the Japanese did to me.

I have forgiven the Japanese for what they did to me, but I can never forget. For fifty years, the “Comfort Women” maintained silence; they lived with a terrible shame, of feeling soiled and dirty. It has taken 50 years for these women’s ruined lives to become a human rights issue.

The war never ended for the “Comfort Women.” We still have the nightmares. After the war I needed major surgery to restore my body.

In 1992 the Korean “Comfort Women” broke their silence. Ms. Kim Hak Sun was the first to speak out. I watched them on TV as they pleaded for justice, for an apology and compensation from the Japanese government. I decided to back them up. I broke my silence at the International Public Hearing on Japanese War Crimes in Tokyo in December 1992 and revealed one of the worst human rights abuses of World War II, the forgotten holocaust.

For the past 15 years, I have worked tirelessly for the plight of “Comfort Women” in Australia and overseas, and for the protection of women in war. Now the time is running out. After sixty years the “Comfort Women” deserve justice. They are worthy of a formal apology from the Japanese government, from Prime Minister Shinzo Abe himself. The Japanese government must take full responsibility for their war crimes.

In 1995 they established the Asian Women’s Fund, to compensate the victims. This Fund was an insult to the “Comfort Women” and they, including myself, refused to accept it. This fund was a private fund, the money came from private enterprise, and not from the government. Japan must come to terms with its history, and acknowledge their war time atrocities. They must teach the correct history of the mistakes made in the past.

It is important that the surviving “Comfort Women” tell their stories. Mr. Chairman and members of the subcommittee, I thank you for this opportunity to share my story. I hope that by speaking out, I have been able to make a contribution to world peace and reconciliation, and that human rights violation against women will never happen again.

Thank you.