

Bong-gi Bae, a twice forgotten Korean “comfort woman” left in Okinawa, Japan

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Bong-gi Bae was the first survivor who spoke of her experience as a “comfort woman” in 1975; 16 years before the testimony of Hak-sun Kim came out.

Bae’s story was forgotten along with all of hundreds of thousands fellow victims of the sexual slavery by the Japanese Imperial Armed Forces for nearly 50 years from 1945 until 1991. Then, she was forgotten for the second time for 16 years after she was exposed as a victim and survivor of the “comfort station” in Okinawa, when she was forced to expose her past to avoid deportation by the Japanese government in 1975. Some Japanese media at the time covered her story but the world was not ready to fully comprehend nor embrace her truth telling until 1991, when Hak-sun Kim publicly testified to her experience.

Her parents were poor farmers in Korea under the Japanese colonial rule, and due to the extreme poverty, she was sold off as a pre-arranged daughter-in-law at the age of six (6). She married when she was 17, but it did not work out. Her brutal and harsh realities are depicted in a book, a biography called *House with Red Tile Roof* by Kawada Humiko.

In late fall of 1943, Bae was in the city of Heungnam, Hamgyeong Province when a recruiter told her “...you can earn money without working and all you need to do is to lie comfortably and sweet bananas will drop into your mouth.”

A year later in November, 1944, at the age of 29, she arrived at Tokashiki Harbor, Naha, Okinawa from Heungnam via Seoul, Busan, Moji, Kagoshima. At the time, the U.S. forces carried out a massive air strike in October 1944, known as ‘10.10 Air Strike of Okinawa’ and by the time Bae arrived, the city and the area was in total ruins. With 6 other Korean women and a newly given Japanese name ‘Akiko,’ she was forced to live the life of a “comfort woman,” serving Japanese soldiers at the “comfort station” with the red tiled roof. After Japan’s defeat, she was interned in a US military camp where she did the identical work.

In May, 1972, US Military returns Okinawa to Japan. Japan proceeds to declare that all those Koreans who entered Okinawa before August 15, 1945 will be allowed permanent residency, and mandated a three-year window to report themselves. Bae, who hadn’t been given an opportunity to learn to read and write Japanese nor Korean, missed the three-year window to report herself. She feared for deportation for not having reported herself to obtain the permanent residency and sought help from a restaurant owner for whom she had worked previously. The restaurant owner helped to record Bae’s story and helped her to petition for the immigration status.

Her painful past was involuntarily exposed as a result and was printed in the media in October 1975. Bae said during an interview that she was too ashamed of what happened at the battlefields to return to Korea after the war ended. When Japanese reporters suggested to her to go and visit her hometown in Korea, she burst into tears and wept profusely. She tried to lead a reclusive life as the media exposure brought about additional hardship for her.

Others who knew her said she was a clean freak.

Bae, Bong-gi was born in September, 1914 in Choongnam, Korea and passed away on October 18, 1991 in Okinawa, Japan.

**Note: This article is a summary of two Hankyoreh Newspaper articles (<http://www.hani.co.kr/arti/international/japan/703614.html> and http://www.hani.co.kr/arti/society/society_general/886205.html) and an essay by Wooki Kim Park, published on a Webzine, "Kyeol" (<http://www.kyeol.kr/node/1330>)