

## ORAL HISTORIES OF THE “COMFORT WOMEN”

### Introduction

The so-called “comfort women” (the term is a translation of a Japanese/Korean euphemism) were sexual slaves who were often recruited by trickery and forced to serve the Japanese military in the field in Asia and the Pacific during the Pacific War. These women were drawn from throughout the Japanese empire, though many were Korean.

The story of Kim Tökchin has many elements common to the experiences of “comfort women,” including the initial promise of factory employment, the role of recruiting agents (Korean in this case), the initial rape by a Japanese officer, and the arrangement of the brothel in which she was forced to serve.

### Document Excerpts with Questions (Longer selection follows this section)

From *True Stories of the Korean Comfort Women*, edited by Keith Howard and translated by Young Joo Lee (London: Cassell, 1995), 42.

## Oral Histories of the “Comfort Women”

### Kim Tökchin

#### *“I Have Much to Say to the Korean Government”*

I suddenly heard a Korean man was in the area again recruiting more girls to work in the Japanese factories. ...

On the first night there I was dragged before a high ranking soldier and raped...

Each of us had to serve an average of 30 to 40 men each day, and we often had no time to sleep.

#### Question:

1. How did the recruitment and deception of the “comfort women” relate to other aspects of wartime mobilization in Japan? Where does Kim think she is going?

**Longer Selection with Questions**

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**Oral Histories of the “Comfort Women”**

**Kim Tökchin**

*“I Have Much to Say to the Korean Government”*

It was the middle of January or perhaps a little later, say the beginning of February, 1937. I was 17 years old. I heard girls were being recruited with promises of work in Japan. It was said that a few had been recruited not long before from P’yöngch’ön where we had lived with my uncle. I wished that at that time I had been able to with them, but I suddenly heard a Korean man was in the area again recruiting more girls to work in the Japanese factories. I went to P’yöngch’ön to meet him and promised him I would go to Japan to work. He gave me the time and place of my departure and I returned home to ready myself to leave. In those days people were rather simple, and I, having had no education, didn’t know anything of the world. All I knew — all I thought I knew — was that I was going to work in a factory to earn money. I never dreamed that this could involve danger. ...

We arrived at Kunbuk station and transferred to a train. It was a public slow train, and traveled slowly down to Pusan, where we boarded a boat. The man who had brought us this far left us, and a Korean couple who said their home was in Shanghai took charge of us. The boat was huge. It had many decks, and we had to climb down many lights of stairs, right to the bottom of the boat to find our bunks. It was a ferry and took many other passengers. The crew brought us bread and water, and we sailed to Nagasaki. At Nagasaki, a vehicle resembling a bus came and took us to a guest-house. From that moment on we were watched by soldiers. I asked one of them: “Why are you keeping us here? What kind of work are we going to do?” He simply replied that he only followed orders. On the first night there I was dragged before a high-ranking soldier and raped. He had a pistol. I was frightened at seeing myself bleed and I tried to run away. He patted my back and said that I would have to go through this experience whether I liked it or not, but that after a few times I would not feel so much pain. We were taken here and there to the rooms of different high-ranking officers on a nightly basis. Every night we were raped. On the fifth day, I asked one of the soldiers; “Why are you taking us from room to room to different men? What is our work? Is it just going to be with different men?” He replied: “You will go wherever orders take you. And you will know what your job is when you get there.” We left Nagasaki after a week of this grueling ordeal.

Led by our Korean guides, we boarded another boat for Shanghai. ...

There was a truck waiting for us at the pier, which whisked us away. There were not rail-tracks, and no buses or taxis to be seen. We passed through disordered streets and arrived in a suburban area. There was a large house right beside an army unit, and we were to be accommodated there. The house was pretty much derelict and inside was divided into many small rooms. There were two Japanese women and about 20 Koreans there, so with the 30 of us

## Primary Source Document with Questions (DBQs) on ORAL HISTORIES OF THE “COMFORT WOMEN”

who had arrived from Uiryŏng there were about 50 women in total. The two Japanese were said to have come from brothels. They were 27 or 28, about ten years older than all the Koreans. The soldiers preferred us Korean girls, saying we were cleaner. Those who had arrived before us came from the south-western provinces of Chŏlla and the central provinces of Ch’ungch’ŏng and were of similar age to us. Those of us who had traveled together kept ourselves very much to ourselves. I was called “Langchang” there. From the 50 of us, excluding those who were ill or had other reasons, 35 girls on average worked each day. ...

We rose at seven in the morning, washed and took breakfast in turns. Then from about 9 o’clock the soldiers began to arrive and form orderly lines. From 6 o’clock in the evening high-ranking officers came, some of whom stayed overnight. Each of us had to serve an average of 30 to 40 men each day, and we often had no time to sleep. When there was a battle, the number of soldiers who came declined. In each room there was a box of condoms which the soldiers used. There were some who refused to use them, but more than half put them on without complaining. I told those who would not use them that I had a terrible disease, and it would be wise for them to use a condom if they didn’t want to catch it. Quite a few would rush straight to penetration without condoms, saying they couldn’t care less if they caught any diseases since they were likely to die on the battlefield at any moment. On such occasions I was terrified that I might actually catch venereal disease. After one use, we threw the condoms away; plenty were provided.

### Questions:

1. How did the recruitment and deception of the “comfort women” relate to other aspects of wartime mobilization in Japan? Where does Kim think she is going?
2. What respective roles were played by the Korean agents, the Japanese military, etc.? How might one describe the whole system that surrounded the “comfort women”?
3. For a long time, the history of the “comfort women” was not widely known or discussed in Korea or Japan. What reasons may there have been for this silence?
4. The issue of the “comfort women” remains highly politically charged, not only between Korea and Japan, but within Korea itself. Why? What sort of debate is there, and what positions do various sides take?