Testimony

Ok-Seon Yi
Born in Korea, 1927

Ok-Seon Yi was hospitalized briefly the day *Grass*, the book that recounts her story, was published. She is pictured here holding a copy of the book. Ok-Seon regained her health soon after and was released from the hospital. August 12, 2017

"I wanted to run away but couldn't because I didn't know how to get back home."

Ok-Seon Yi was born to a low-income family in Busan, one of Korea's major port cities in South Gyeongsang province. Ok-Seon wanted to go to school but her parents couldn't afford to send her. So when the owners of an udon noodle shop said they would help with her education, she was thrilled to follow them. She helped out the shop owners, thinking they would later fund her schooling. However, instead, they sold her to work for a *kisaeng* house, a place where girls were trained to become courtesans. Then, in July 1942, at the age of fifteen, Ok-Seon was abducted from her native Korea and sent to a "comfort station" at a military airport in East Yanji, China.

The Japanese Imperial Armed Forces established and operated "comfort stations" throughout their occupied territories from the 1930s through the end of WWII. Hundreds of thousands of women and girls from across Asia were forced into Japanese military sexual slavery during these years.

At the "comfort station," Ok-Seon spent her days working on a construction site, building an airport. At night, she was gang-raped. She remained a sex slave of the Japanese military for three years, during which time she contracted syphilis, leaving her barren.

"In China, I tried to run away but couldn't because we [Japanese military sex slaves] were kept inside the electric wire fence." She went on to say, "At the end of the war, I was abandoned. I didn't even know the war ended."

It would be more than half a century before Ok-Seon would return home to Korea. In the meantime, she married a Korean man. Days after their marriage, he left her to join the Korean Volunteer Army, a communist force. In his absence she cared for his elderly parents until they passed away. Only then, after having devoted many years to looking after her husband's parents, did she discover that her husband had another family—a wife and three children, with another child on the way. She decided to leave him. Her second marriage to a Chinese man was also troubled. That husband, with two children of his own, turned out to be a heavy gambler.

When she returned to Korea in 1996 her younger siblings shunned her. After the 2015 "comfort women" agreement between the Korean and Japanese governments was made without consulting the survivors, Ok-Seon spoke out.

"[Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo] Abe looks like he's waiting for us ["comfort women"] to die. The history [of Japan's past war crimes] will not erase even then."

Said Ok-Seon, "I'll fight until the day the Japanese government formally apologizes and pays reparations."

Photo credit: Education for Social Justice Foundation
Source: Kum-Sook Kim, *Grass*, 『풀』, (South Korea, Bori, 2017).