World War II Sex Slaves Bear Witness

Survivors give accounts of kidnapping and rape at the hands of Japanese soldiers.

By ALEEN JACOBSON

Chang Jin Lee, a New York artist, wanted to commemorate what she feared would become a “forgotten history,” she said. After reading an article in The New York Times in 2004 about the experiences of an estimated 200,000 women and girls who had been forced into sexual slavery by the Japanese military during World War II, she decided to do something about it.

From 2008 to 2012, Ms. Lee, who grew up in Seoul, South Korea, took four trips to seven countries to interview survivors, take photographs and gather images, which she has exhibited in different ways across the United States and in other countries over the last few years.

The latest exhibition — seven striking panels showing survivors when they were young and two videos with interviews, photographs and folk songs — is now on view at the Charles W. Wang Center at Stony Brook University. Titled “Comfort Women Wanted,” it is named after the headline in newspaper advertisements instigated by Japanese soldiers to work as sexual slaves for soldiers in the imperial Japanese Army.

The advertisement did not work very well, Ms. Lee said, though a few women may have been paid for their work in the beginning. The rest were kidnapped or deceived with offers of other jobs that did not exist. They ended up being raped up to 100 times per day by one soldier after another in spaces euphemistically called “comfort stations,” which came in the form of huts or rooms in industrial complexes throughout Imperial Japan, and occupied territories. A former Japanese soldier — one of only two to publicly acknowledge and apologize for the practice, she said — describes the conditions in one of Ms. Lee’s videos.

"It was fast," says Yanoji Kanoko, the former soldier. "No hug, no kiss. We had no time to do such things." The women sat, wearing kimono, he says, as men stood in front of them for a few minutes “and just had sex.” His video runs concurrently with a longer one featuring interviews with some of the survivors.

Emah Kastina, an Indonesian woman who was kidnapped from a market when she was 15, says in a whispery voice: “It hurt me inside. Some of them beat me. It hurt my heart. I hated being treated like that.”

Jen Ruff O’Hara, who as Ms. Lee said, was the first European to come forward, described being selected at age 21 at a Japanese prisoner camp where she had already spent three and a half years, as her mother and the families of nine other young women who were also being tortured were called and ordered to meet them. She said, “I am not a woman, I am a woman soldier.”

The exhibition, created by the Assistant Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution, is intended to help women into prominence for the Imperial Japanese Army. Most of the women were unpaid and unwilling, and were kidnapped or tricked, “It hurt me inside,” one women says, “Some of them beat me.”

1993, the current government's policy, led by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, is to deny that the women were coerced into working in brothels. However, many other nations and most experts believe the testimony of the survivors (who represent only about 25 to 30 percent of the women who went through the ordeal), Ms. Lee said.

Jongjoo Jin, the associate director of cultural programs at the Wang Center, who invited Ms. Lee to show her work and curated the exhibition, said, “We must not forget the continuing global human trafficking problem.” The video is very curious,” Ms. Jin said. “We can learn from women who didn’t have a strong voice in society.” The exhibition has provided strong lessons from the past, she said, “for women who didn’t have a strong voice in society.”

"Comfort Women Wanted" is on display through Jan. 10, 2015 at the Zoell Gallery, Charles B. Wang Center, Stony Brook University. Information: brook.edu/wang or 631-632-4800.