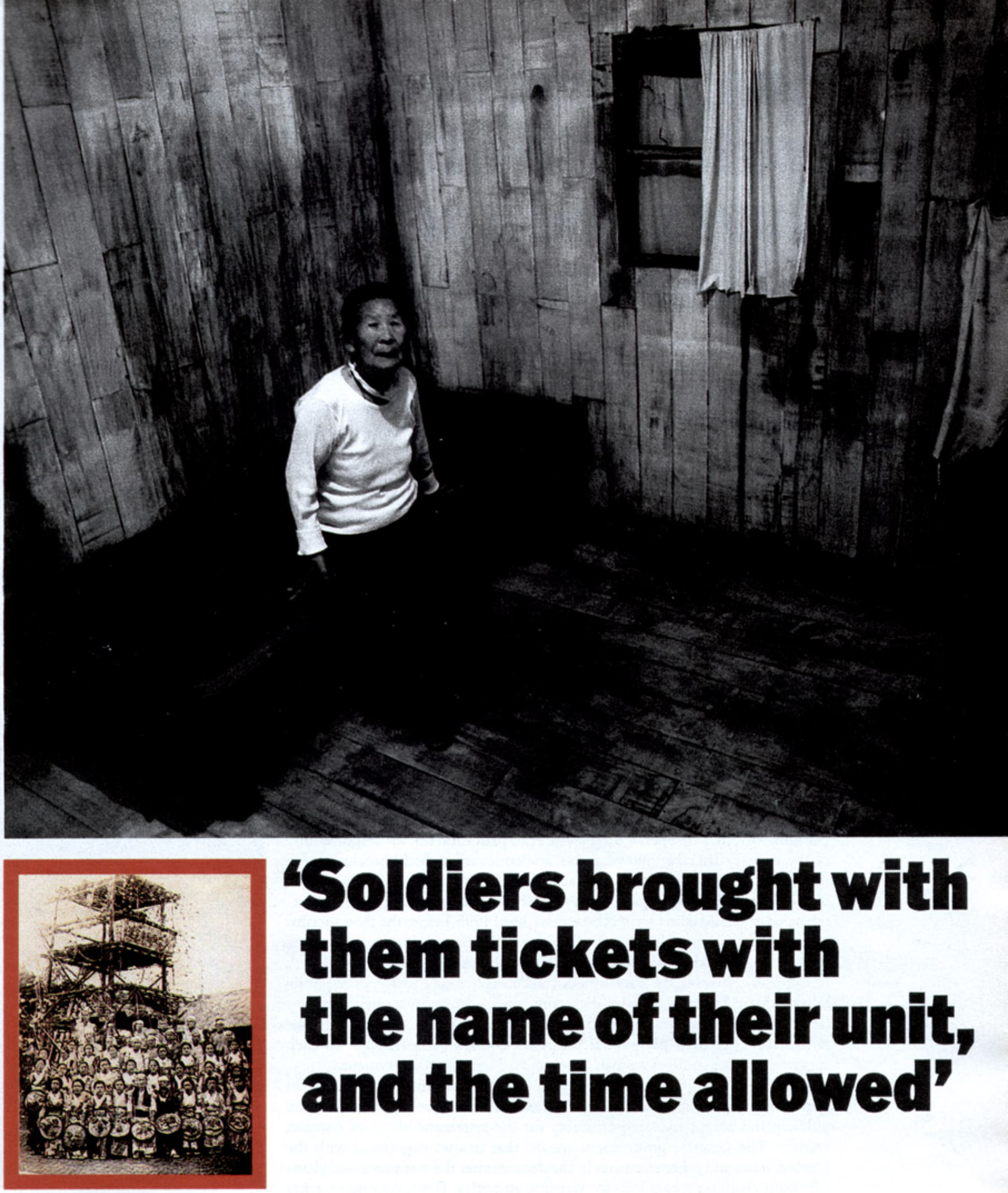
Soon-Ae Kang, exhausted from speaking about her ordeal as a second-world-war comfort woman, in her tiny one-bedroom apartment near Seoul. She lives alone – the flat is paid for by the government. She is lonely and wishes she'd been able to have a daughter, who could have understood her. Right: Soon-Ae as a young woman, in traditional Korean costume. Her ordeal began at 13

WAITING IN PAIN

They were termed 'essential military supplies' – cargoes of girls as young as 11, kidnapped and herded in their thousands into rape camps by the Japanese army, to keep troops happy. Today the surviving comfort women still wait for Tokyo to say sorry. Report by Christine Toomey. Photographs by Ji-Hyun Hahn



Myung-Kum Mun was taken to Sunwu in northern China at the age of 18, ostensibly for factory work. Instead, she was subjected to eight years of sexual abuse. Above right: Myung-Mun sits in the House of Sharing's replica of the spartan quarters in which comfort women were forced to service Japanese soldiers. Right: retrieved by an American soldier from a Japanese military backpack in the Philippines in 1944, this picture is believed to show a group of Korean comfort women, dressed in traditional Japanese costume, in the third row

'Soldiers brought with them tickets with the name of their unit, and the time allowed'

throughout the Far East, under the cargo heading "essential military supplies", herded into a widespread network of rape camps and forced to sexually "comfort" soldiers of the Japanese Imperial Army.

Soon-Ae, who chain-smokes and rarely looks anyone in the eye, has spent a lifetime trying to forget her past. But now she is an old woman, she wants people to know what happened to her and the other "comfort women". Unlike Holocaust survivors who have successfully sued for the return of stolen assets, or slave labourers who have won monetary compensation from German manufacturers for whom they worked under the Nazi regime, these women, like other wartime victims of the Japanese, have never been compensated for the atrocities they suffered. For most it is too late. They are already dead. But some, like Soon-Ae, are determined to fight for an official acknowledgment of what they were put through, for financial redress and for the facts to be recorded in Japanese history books.

Earlier this year, 15 former comfort women from Korea, China, Taiwan and the Philippines filed a lawsuit against the Japanese government in an American court – under an ancient quirk of US jurisprudence increasingly used against alleged violators of international law – demanding a formal apology and compensation. But the Japanese have consistently refused similar requests before. Fearing more survivors will die before the case is resolved, Soon-Ae and a small group of other former comfort women recently granted rare access to a young Korean photographer, Ji-Hyun Hahn, to document their lives. This group of frail old women, most of whom live together in a communal home on a remote hillside outside Seoul, believe these photographs and their testimonies will be among the last efforts they can make to urge the Japanese government to apologise formally for their barbaric treatment.

While some of the women find it difficult to talk, Soon-Ae still speaks with rage, peppering her harrowing narrative with expletives, as she remembers the pain of her years in captivity: "When I cried for my home I was beaten. I cried so often that by the end of the war every tooth was knocked from my head. Soldiers brought with them tickets with the name of their unit, the stamp of the head of their unit and time allowed. Maximum was 30 minutes, minimum three minutes. Officers kept and supervised these tickets." Some of the soldiers, she says, showed her pity. "They said they couldn't help but do it, because it was an order from their emperor."

Sometimes the girls were forced to wear traditional Japanese costumes and sing Japanese songs for the soldiers. They were forbidden from speaking their own language in public. "We had a medical check once a week," says →

BOTTOM RIGHT: COURTESY OF THE COURIER-TIMES, USA

'I don't want to live. I have led a life full of tears and sorrow. It is time to ease it'

Soon-Ae. "They also injected us twice a month with 606 [a strong disinfectant, causing any woman who had become pregnant to abort spontaneously]." As the war progressed, she says, the number of soldiers who came to her each day grew to between 20 and 30. "Gradually the air raids and bombings by the USA became worse. Officers who were higher in rank committed suicide." Soon-Ae was eventually released when Palau fell to American forces in 1944. In the spring of 1946 she was taken back to Korea on an American ship. She never told her family what had happened.

Although Soon-Ae married, briefly, she could never have children. Thirty years later, she attempted suicide. "I still take medicine because of the pain," she says, slowly lifting her skirt to reveal scars left by shrapnel wounds to her legs and buttocks, a legacy of the allied bombing raids. The internal damage that resulted from her initial rape by two Japanese soldiers was even more horrific. Even now, it still hurts to urinate. "I can't walk well. I am so lonely. I don't want to live. I have led a life full of tears and sorrow," she cries. "It is time to ease it."

It was not until Soon-Ae was in her 60s that she first dared admit what had happened to her during the war. Even then, she does not believe she would have had the courage to talk about her past, had another elderly South Korean woman named Hak-Soon Kim not spoken out first. Hak-Soon had waited until all members of her family had died, so that there was nobody left to be ashamed by her disclosures, before filing a lawsuit in 1991 against the Japanese government for the appalling abuses she suffered as a comfort woman. Her testimony prompted several hundred other former comfort women to come forward with their stories. At first the Japanese government tried to argue that comfort stations were operated as private enterprises and not the responsibility of the military. But the following year, academics unearthed historical documents proving the operation was organised and sanctioned at the highest levels of the military. Still, the Japanese proverb "If something smells, put a lid on it" prevailed. It would take another three years, until 1995, before the then socialist prime minister, Tomiichi Murayama, expressed a personal apology to those women still alive who had been subjected to such abuse.

Officially, however, the government continued to refuse to accept responsibility or formal liability. To salve their conscience, some government ministers helped set up a small private fund, backed by a number of wealthy corporations, that offered to pay several thousand pounds compensation to each surviving former comfort woman. Most refused to accept the payment.

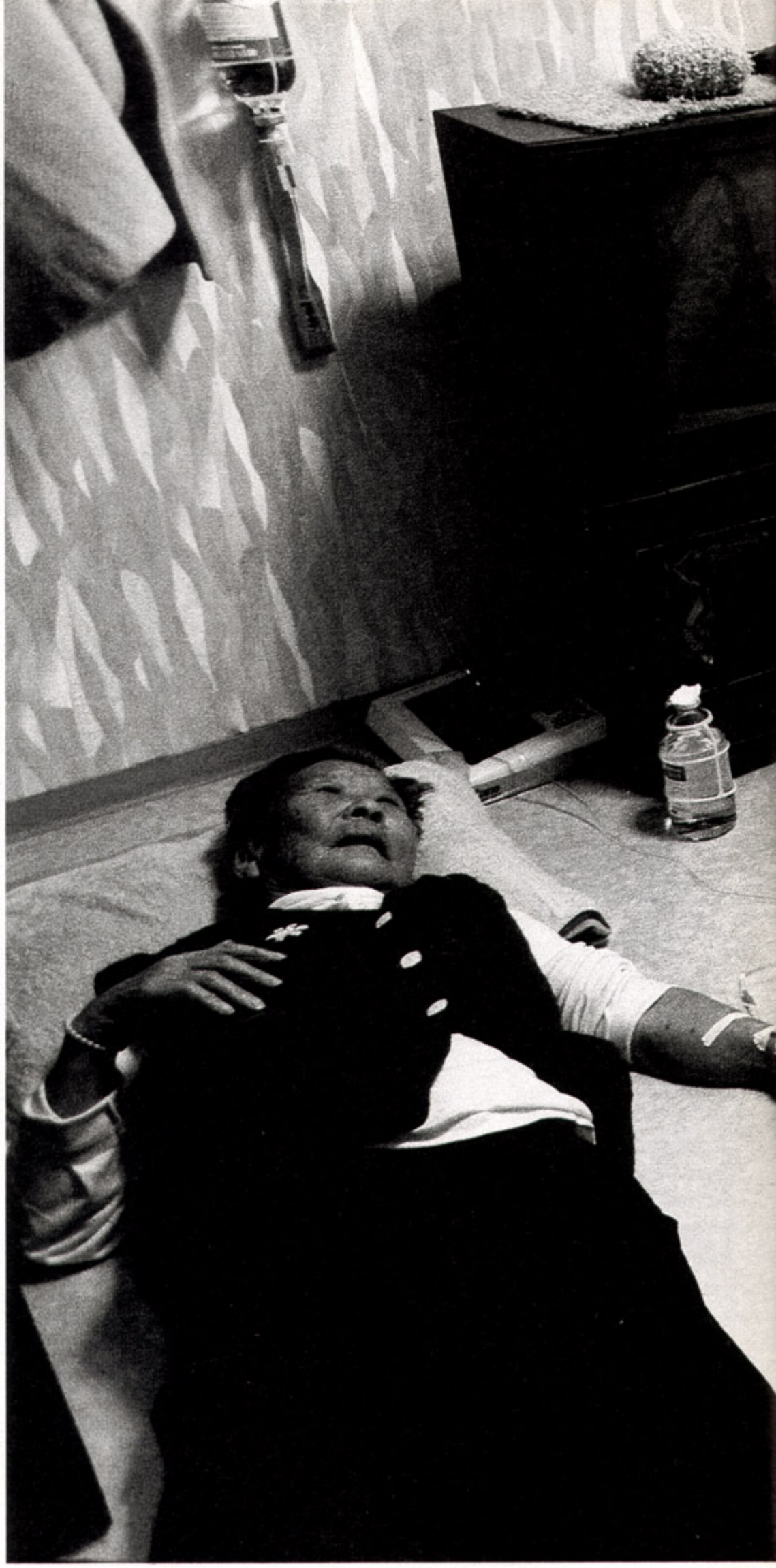
In 1996 the United Nations Human Rights Commission launched an inquiry into Japanese "military sexual slavery", and called on Japan to apologise publicly and accept legal responsibility for the systematic abuse of comfort women. The Japanese government argued that treaties negotiated with the United States and other countries in the decades after the war prevented plaintiffs from claiming reparations for wartime atrocities. The following year, her lawsuit unresolved, Hak-Soon died.

Japan's refusal to apologise for its past stems from the country's strong Confucian-Shinto ethos, according to which deference to one's ancestors is sacrosanct. To apologise for wartime actions would, in the eyes of many, amount to spitting on one's lineage. In the face of such intransigence, several years ago the government of South Korea started compiling a formal register of surviving comfort women – more than 80% came from North and South Korea – and has since given limited financial help to some like Soon-Ae, enabling them to eke out a meagre living in their old age.

Most help for Korea's comfort women, however, has come from nongovernmental organisations such as the Korean Council for Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery. Five years ago, a group of Buddhist and social organisations, helped by public donations, built a complex called Nanumui Jib – the House of Sharing – on the outskirts of Kwangju in Kyonggi province, South Korea, to provide a home for former comfort women with nowhere else to live.

☆ ☆ ☆ ☆ ☆

It is in the House of Sharing that Ji-Hyun Hahn has taken most of the photographs shown here. She lived in the house for several weeks over the course of six months. Ji-Hyun, 27, says many of the women still found it impossible



Soon-Duk Kim (below) keeps her fellow survivors Myung-Kum Mun (left) and Gun-Ja Kim company as they receive glucose intravenously. A range of chronic illnesses – many a legacy of their wartime experiences – has made the women weak and unable to eat properly. Below left: Soon-Duk Kim (far right) in her 30s, with friends in Seoul. She married and had four children, only two of whom are still alive

to talk about their past. At first, the only one who would talk to her was Myung-kum Mun, a woman in her 80s who had come to live there only recently after a Chinese researcher into comfort women had found her living destitute in a small town in the Heilongian area of China's northeastern border with Russia. "Myung-kum Mun was lonely. She realised I was lonely in that house too, and she tried to look after me. When I started talking to her about my own family, and how my mother had died of cancer when I was younger, she felt sorry for me and fussed over me," explains Ji-Hyun, who first became interested in photographing the comfort women's lives after seeing a documentary about them while she was a student in Seoul. "The cinema was nearly empty. That made a big impression on me. It seemed like no one else was interested in this hidden history. Yet it was not so long ago. It could have happened to my grandmother." Ji-Hyun uses the Korean word *halmoni*, meaning grandmother – an affectionate term used in Korea for former comfort women – when she refers to Myung-kum.

But as the old woman began to relate her past, Ji-Hyun realised that, like many former comfort women, Myung-kum had never been able to have children of her own. Myung-kum was 18 when she was taken from her home in the Korean province of Cholla by Japanese police, who told her she was needed as a factory worker. Instead, she was taken by boat to a comfort station in China, where she was forced to service up to 30 Japanese soldiers a day for nearly eight years.

Her ordeal ended only when the Japanese army withdrew from China, and she fled to a small village nearby where many Koreans without the means to return home settled after the war. Many former comfort women were too ashamed to return to their homes, even if they had the means to do so. Many suffered from venereal disease and mental illness. Those who contracted diseases during the war were killed, as they were considered no longer of use. Thousands more were killed by the retreating Japanese army. Some were herded into caves, which were then dynamited. Others were forced to commit suicide alongside soldiers of the defeated army.

Myung-kum spent the next 54 years eking out a living collecting mushrooms and selling them in the mountains around the village where she had settled in China. She married, but was so physically damaged by the abuse she had suffered that she was never able to bear a child. She was nearly 80 when she was contacted by the House of Sharing. At first she refused to leave China. But after a Buddhist priest called Hye Jin, who had helped set up the housing complex, took her younger brother and sister to visit ⟶

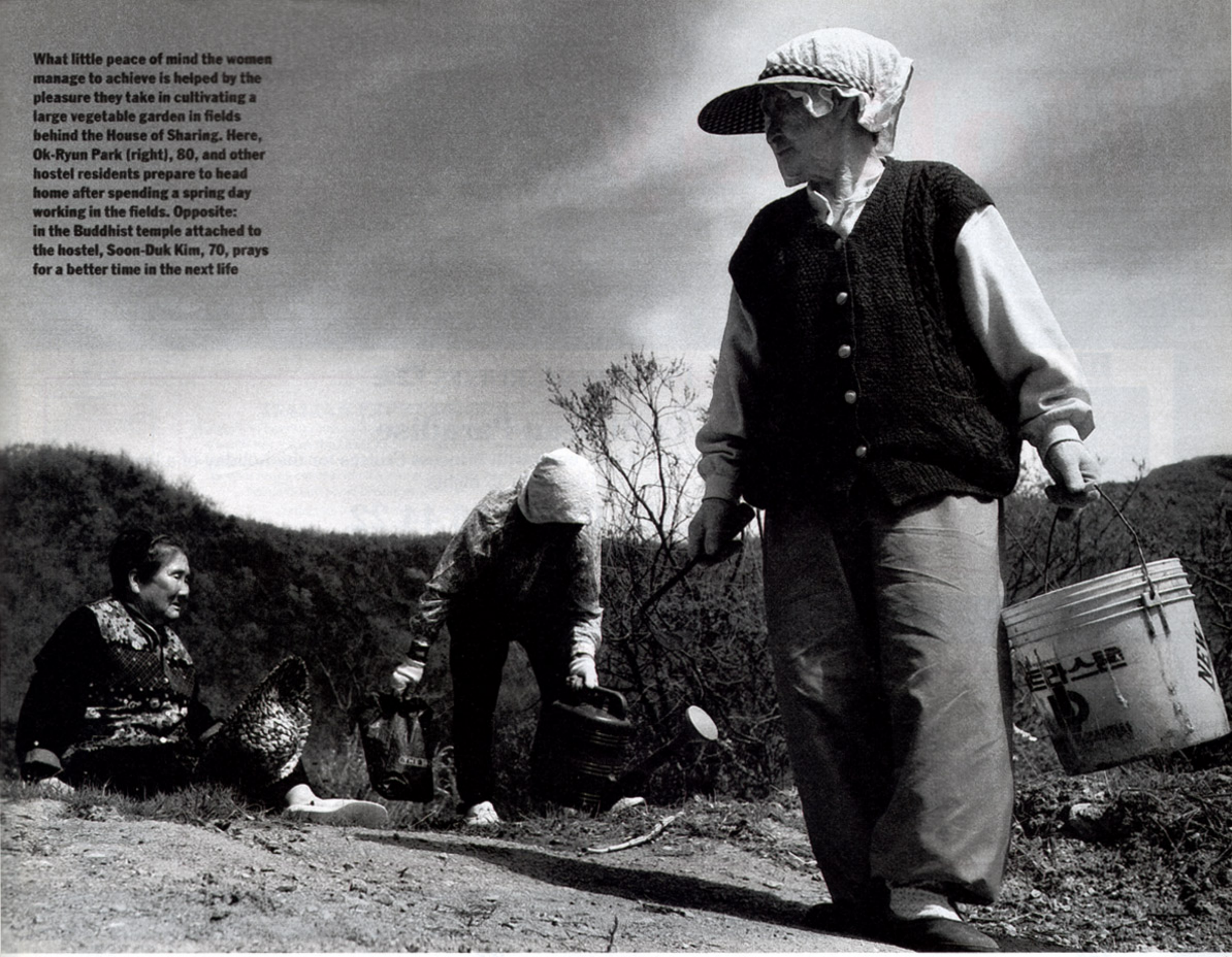
her, Myung-kum says she was eventually persuaded to return to Korea.

Myung-kum was the only woman who would accompany Ji-Hyun to a small museum attached to the House of Sharing, where a replica of a room in a former comfort station has been reconstructed. Its purpose is to educate visitors to the site, most of whom are Japanese. The small room contains a simple pallet and mattress, a metal washstand and a half-century-old condom in a glass case. "At first, Grandmother Mun kept moving over to the door to make sure it was unlocked," says Ji-Hyun. "Then she just sat there on the bed, staring ahead of her and saying nothing. She was a gentle and soft-hearted woman. She moved so slowly and stiffly. Sometimes it was almost as if she was already dead." At the beginning of November, aged 84, Myung-kum died of a heart attack.

Another woman who has been willing to talk about her past is Soon-Duk Kim, who was tricked into leaving her home in South Korea at the age of 15 with the promise of work in a Japanese factory. Soon-Duk's father had been beaten to death when she was a young girl by Japanese police after he dared to smoke tobacco leaves he had grown on the family's plot of land, in defiance of a Japanese monopoly on the crop. Soon-Duk was one of five children. "I was ignorant of the world," she says. "All I thought was that I was going to earn money in a factory. I never dreamt this could involve danger."

Instead of being taken to a factory, Soon-Duk was taken by ship to Nagasaki, together with 30 other girls and young women. There, she says, they were herded into a small guesthouse and raped daily by dozens of Japanese soldiers. After one week, the group of women and girls was taken by ship to Shanghai, where they were housed in a large house near an army unit and subjected to the same sort of abuse. Each girl was given a small room. "At approximately 9 in the morning, soldiers began to form queues. After 6 in the evening, high-ranking officers arrived. Each of us was visited by an average of

'Each of us was visited by 30 to 40 soldiers a day. We could hardly find time to sleep. I was very sick'



What little peace of mind the women manage to achieve is helped by the pleasure they take in cultivating a large vegetable garden in fields behind the House of Sharing. Here, Ok-Ryun Park (right), 80, and other hostel residents prepare to head home after spending a spring day working in the fields. Opposite: in the Buddhist temple attached to the hostel, Soon-Duk Kim, 70, prays for a better time in the next life

30 to 40 soldiers a day. We could hardly find time to sleep. I was very sick.

"I was so badly bleeding. Soldiers who just returned from the battlefield were extremely wild. On the contrary, when they were about to start for battle they tended to be weak. Some even wept for fear of combat. When they actually came back alive, I was glad.

"Some confessed their love and even proposed," says Soon-Duk, who, photographs taken after her wartime ordeal show, was a pretty young woman.

One of those who paid particular attention to Soon-Duk was a Japanese officer she knew only by the name Izumi. After being held at a series of comfort stations for three years, the officer provided Soon-Duk and four other young women with travel permits to return to Korea. "After about 20 days of travelling I came home. But neighbours talked behind my back, my family was still poor. I had no choice but to leave for Seoul."

There, she worked for many years as a housemaid. She eventually set up home with a married man as his second wife and, unusually for a former comfort woman, was able to have four children. For more than 50 years she told nobody what had happened to her during the war: "I buried all my anger and hatred deep in my heart. I desired to tell the story I experienced in my youth. But it was impossible to find someone to talk to." Several years ago, Soon-Duk contacted a radio station in Seoul, who put her in touch with the House of Sharing. She moved there shortly afterwards, and now spends much of her time drawing vibrant but disturbing paintings of her wartime experiences.

Soon-Duk is one of the most active and outspoken of the dozen women who live together in the house. She is one of the few who will spend time talking to the hundreds of Japanese tourists who each year visit the museum there. "I do not want to be forced back to the past by talking to the tourists about what happened. But I want the present generation to realise what their forebears did," she says, explaining how some of the visitors offer to cook and clean for the *halmoni* as a mark of atonement and respect.

Most of the other women at the House of Sharing prefer to spend their days working in the fields close by, cultivating vegetables. It is the only place where they seem to find peace. "They only seem calm in the face of nature," says Ji-Hyun. Despite the name of the house where they live, the women at Nanumi Jib rarely talk to each other about their pasts. Although the complex could house up to 100, only a handful with nowhere else to go live there. Most find it too painful a reminder. They seldom share their innermost thoughts and fears. Most remain locked in their own private worlds of silence and pain. They suffer from frequent nightmares and illnesses related to their years of abuse.

☆ ☆ ☆ ☆ ☆

Soon-Ae, however, is still fiercely independent. She says she could not bear to live in the House of Sharing, where she would come into contact with Japanese tourists eager to delve into her past. Instead she has devoted her energy to attending demonstrations staged by surviving comfort women from all over the country every Wednesday outside the Japanese embassy in Seoul.

Last month, a mock trial was held on behalf of a handful of former comfort women. Attended by hundreds of legal experts, academics and human rights activists from around the world, the trial was staged to draw international attention to Japan's refusal to take responsibility for its past.

But Soon-Ae despairs of all this talk and lack of action by the Japanese government. In the past five years, more than 50 of the nearly 200 former comfort women registered with the Korean government have died. "Soon we will all be dead. I am like a ghost crawling my way through life," she says, burying her face in her hands. "I just don't want the Japanese government to lie any more. I don't want them to deny our mistreatment." ■