**Maija Rhee Devine’s** **Radio Hankook** (Seattle) talk on 8/13/2021: The video of the talk in Korean is on YouTube at:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_G7-9G9Loi8&t=541s>

(Note: The video portion begins at 1.7 minutes into the program. The sound of the beginning audio portion is a bit low, but it picks up when the video begins.)

The program is in Korean. So, for those you whose Korean is not strong, I provide the transcript in English here.

**Interviewer**: Hong Sung Wu, General Manager

**Maija**: I am wearing two pins today that have enormous significance to our talk. The first is a yellow butterfly pin. It was featured in the movie “귀향” (“Spirits’ Homecoming”) as the symbol of Korean comfort women who died during WWII and could not return home. But their spirit transformed into butterflies and returned. The second pin shows the image of former President Harry S. Truman holding a cane on a walk. Since he played a pivotal role in turning the Korean War away from possibly triggering a Third World War to engineering a successful Limited War and saving at least South Korea as a democratic nation, I am wearing the pin to honor him.

**Hong:** You have a connection to the Truman Library.

**Maija**: Yes, my husband served as the director for thirteen years before retiring. Also, he completed writing his book on the Korean War.

**Hong**: How did you start your writing work on ‘comfort women’?

**Maija**: My nephew-in-law is a high school teacher in Seoul and he takes his students to the House of Sharing where several ‘comfort women’ live. When I heard about his work, I became interested in finding more about the women. Soon, a book of their art works was published and my nephew-in-law gave me a copy. The paintings featured in the book moved me deeply, and I dedicated myself to doing research and writing on the topic.

**Hong**: Comfort women issues started long ago, but Japan has not apologized. Why don’t they apologize?

**Maija**: Saying “we are sorry” can sound perfunctory, as in cases of someone caught in a car accident saying to the other party, “I am sorry.” Japan offered similar kind of apology eight times. But they did not satisfy the victims. What Korean comfort women want is not a simple apology (“사과”) but an acknowledgement of Japan having committed war crimes and repenting their criminal deeds (“사죄”). Take German Prime Minister Willy Brandt, for example. At an event in Poland, memorializing Hitler’s crimes against Jewish people, Willy Brandt knelt on a concrete surface in rain without an umbrella and stayed, with his head bowed, and kept silence. When Koreans and other victim nations’ people saw that, they believed Willy Brandt embodied a really sincere, heart-felt apology.

**Hong**: I don’t think Japan will make that kind of apology.

**Maija**: Scholars assert that because Japanese people adhere to “face-saving” culture and tradition, they will have difficulty says things that will cause their ancestors to lose face. Also, Japan’s assertion is that all wars are cruel and destructive to all who engage in them. They say, World War II nearly wiped us out, too. We were victims, too. In fact, they say, we were the only nation in the world that got atomic bombs dropped on us.

**Hong**: He laughs and says, “That’s because they attacked American first!” Look at this Comfort Woman statue. There are many of them in the world. And Japan demands that they be removed.

**Maija:** Japanese cannot accept Comfort Women statues because allowing them to stay at all places where they crop up would mean they have to acknowledge their ancestors, whom they must honor at all costs, committed war crimes. They find doing so nearly impossible.

**Hong**: The matter of comfort women did not become public issues until many decades later. How long did everyone keep quiet about it?

**Maija:** The comfort women and their countries’ people all kept quiet for 46 years. During all that time, the women were destitute. They had no medical care. No jobs. No housing. But they kept their silence. They played dead. Many actually died for lack of essentials of life. Finally, in 1991, comfort woman Kim Hak-soon came out. She publicly admitted having been a comfort woman. Why did they keep silence? Because they felt paralyzing shame.

**Hong**: Here are some pictures. The far left one is comfort woman, “grandma,” Kim Hak-soon.

**Maija:** Next to her is comfort woman, “grandma,” Lee Ok-sun.

**Hong**: How many are still alive?

**Maija**: 14 at last count. It may be 13, now. But there can be many more, may be a thousand or more we don’t know about. They never came out. They live in hiding. Because of the shame they still feel, they did not register with the government. Only 238 registered. Thousands may have returned home. If they came out, the shame of their past, even if they did not choose to become comfort women, would bring shame to their children, in-laws, friends, etc.

**Hong**: So, the horrible history happened 76 years ago, and they kept silent for 46 years. So, it’s only been the last 30 years that comfort women issues saw daylight. What about their “*han*,” the heart wound the women must feel. What can we do to eliminate it?

**Maija**: One, through external developments. Second, from internal development. As for the first one, comfort women and their activists and supporters believe a true, heart-felt, sincere apology from Japan and “legal” compensation (generated with government-appropriated funds, not citizens’ funds) will heal the “*han*.” But obtaining these will be difficult and may take forever. But many of these “grandma” comfort women are nearing or already over a hundred years old. They are dying. And we cannot let them die with their “*han*” knots in their hearts. Can we? So, then, we need to look for alternative ways. One way involves comfort women’s own internal, spiritual work. The Dalai Lama taught that a way to dissolve a “*han*” is for the owner of the “*han*” to be merciful to herself.

**Hong:** That’s not easy to do.

**Maija**: Of course not. It’s very difficult. And there’s a catch to finding that self-mercy. The person with a “*han*” must eliminate judgment about who and what caused their suffering. She must not look at the source of their pain and say, “That’s not right. That’s bad. Or that’s good.” **Hong**: That’s something only saints can do.

**Maija**: Yes. It’s extremely difficult to do that. But if one can do it, that will finally release her from the “*han*.” It will disappear now!

**Hong**: Ah, most difficult. And because comfort women’s lives were completely destroyed, recovering anything may be impossible. But when all the survivors pass away, the issues surrounding them may peter out. By the way, would you shed some light on who these ‘comfort women” were? Where did the words, “comfort women,” come from?

**Maija**: The Japanese used “comfort women” as a euphemism for prostitutes, who “comforted” their soldiers who lay down their lives for their country. According to a book. *The Survey of Comfort Women*, nearly 80% of the two hundred interviewees stated they were engaged in farm work or labored as domestic help. And most of them were between the ages of 11 and 19. But Japanese conservative observers insist the women were already prostitutes with contracts to service soldiers in battle fields. Some girls were in their yard skipping rope or playing other games when they were grabbed by military men and taken away. Some were sex workers, but they were of a very small fraction of the total number.

**Hong**: Tell us about these “grandmas” in the pictures.

**Maija**: These women were residents of the House of Sharing, the residential facility south of Seoul. Whenever I visited Korea, sometimes once a year, I treated the “grandmas” to lunches and dinners. Afterwards, we went back to the House of Sharing and we sat around in the living room and visited some more.

**Hong**: So, how many ‘comfort women” were there total?

**Maija**: According to a highly respected Japanese historian, Yoshiaki Yoshimi, there were 200,000 comfort women, most of whom were Koreans. There were women from Japan, China, Philippines, etc., including Dutch women. But there are some historians who used numbers as low as 20,000.

**Hong**: Oh, those must be Japanese historians.

**Maija**: Oh, no. There are some Korean scholars who also use such a low number. For example, author Yu-ha Park….

**Hong**: And there’s the Harvard University professor….

**Maija**: Right. Mark Ramseyer. Well, Yu-ha Park said in her book, *Comfort Women of the Empire,* that the Korean comfort women were prostitutes, and she was sued by nine Korean comfort women. The judge ordered Park to pay $8000.00 to each of the nine victims for defamation of their names.

**Hong**: What are some of the details of their abduction and sexual abuse?

Maija: In some cases, even before they arrived by truck at comfort stations, they were dragged into woods and were raped. They had no idea they’d be doing sex work. Some girls jumped with joy when the truck approached a large building that looked like a hospital. They thought this must be where they’d be washing used bandages, and so on. They were shocked when they were dropped off at buildings with stalls large enough for only one bed and 10 to 20 soldiers each day pounced on them. On weekends, the number increase to 40 to 50 soldiers. Shocked by such turn of events, many girls killed themselves. Some women were given opium shots by comfort station owners to reduce pain. The women ended up dying from addiction. Some tried to run away, but were caught and shot to death. One of the women I met, Lee Ok-sun, showed me the scar on her foot from a military police slashing her foot to keep her from running away again. Maybe we will be seeing the photo I provided.

**Hong:** With all these Comfort Women statues. It’s hard to explain about them to outsiders…. What do you think of the statue controversy?

**Maija**: I often wonder if erecting more and more statues and butting heads with Japan every time is the most effective strategy. The statues seem to escalate more Japanese hostility toward Koreans and push them away from cooperatively seeking solutions. I think other ways, like doing radio and TV talks, writing and publishing, and lecturing can bring long-term results. Japan cannot stop us from doing these things.

**Hong**: These paintings show comfort women being transported in big ships.

**Maija**: Yes. And Japan claims that during wars, other countries also employed prostitutes. But in other countries, their military did not transport massive numbers of women in their military ships and vehicles to the battle grounds. In other wars, women came on their own or were already near military installations. Yes, in other battles, other countries also used the women. And there were innumerable cases of rapes of ordinary citizens too by the military.

**Hong**: This map shows there were comfort stations in many different countries.

**Maija**: Yes, there were twelve different countries plus some territories, totaling 14 geographic areas. In all territories occupied by Japan, their military set up comfort stations.

**Hong**: Please comment on how to resolve these comfort women issues.

**Maija**: As I mentioned, erecting comfort women statues seems to drive involved parties further apart. It seems to lock opponents into a headlock. So, I am not convinced that is the most effective way. But, as we are doing now, broadcasting, discussing issues, lecturing, and publishing materials going out to the world, Japan cannot stop these activities.

**Hong**: You have a poem to share. The title is, “Death by Sex, Death by Corona,” right?

**Maija**: Actually, I have a different poem to read. It’s called “Freedom From Teeth.”

The poem text here:

**Hong**: Whose poem is this?

**Maija**: Oh, I wrote it. The original is in English. So, I translated it into Korean for today.

**Hong**: These stories are so important that we should have you come back and talk more another time. Please say a few departing words.

**Maija**: I thank all the listeners of this program today. Earlier, you mentioned that once the surviving Korean comfort women pass away, perhaps, the hot issues may simmer down. But that will absolutely be not true, because there are hundreds, maybe a thousand or more who returned to South Korea but never registered. Of course, a great number of them also must have passed away. But there may be hundreds still living. And those who passed away, took their “*han*” heart wound with them, but they also passed the “*han*” to us, the younger generation, to continue carrying it for their sake.

**Hong**: Ah, I see. You authored a book titled *The Voices of Heaven*, right? Would you tell us what the book is about?

**Maija**: It tells stories of the Korean War but also about a couple who were much in love with each other, but, because they did not have a son, they invite a second wife to live with them and produce a son. I am that couple’s daughter. I later learned even I was an adopted child.

**Hong**: Are you planning on writing other books about comfort women?

**Maija:** Yes, I already have 20 essays on this comfort women topic published in newspapers. Each of these stories deals with one of the many issues surrounding comfort women. My book will also feature some poems I wrote on this topic. I’d also like to include some pictures of the paintings the comfort women created. I am also writing a novel about comfort women, using their voices.