

*men were brought from Korea to Japan during the war to work in coal mines, on construction sites, and at other difficult tasks throughout the country. An unknown number of women were also pressed into service in Japan and throughout the Empire, in many cases forced to become "comfort women," working in primitive brothels to serve the Japanese troops and administrators from Manchuria to the islands of the East Indies.*

*Seventy, Ahn Juretsu looks very frail, but his voice is forceful and loud. He has severe difficulty hearing due to injuries sustained during the war when he was enrolled in labor service for the government that had annexed his native Korea in 1910.*

Korea was a colony. No human rights at all. We were just the same as slaves. You have a mouth, but can't say what you want. You have a mind and a body, but can't think or do what you want. I'm from Chūsei Hokudō, in the middle of what's today South Korea. Because we were farmers under Japanese government control, the conditions of our lives were so poor, you can't imagine it. Just like beggars today. Out of about eighty households in my hamlet, only three children went to Korean elementary school. The school fees were sixty *sen* per month. We couldn't afford that. I went to school for three years, but had to drop out. Even at that, I didn't go into the first grade until I was thirteen.

I then went to work in Keijō, Seoul today, and got a job in a spinning plant. Managed by Japanese. There were exams to get in. They didn't normally hire ordinary people, but those from my province had a reputation as good workers. You entered the plant at seven A.M. and worked to seven P.M., all for seventeen *sen*. Japanese—even women—who patrolled the plant in white hats, earned two yen a day. In those days, an egg cost one *sen*. For seventeen eggs I worked all day long, covered in oil.

It was 1940, the time of the twenty-six-hundredth anniversary of the founding of the Japanese Empire. I remember singing songs about that. But rapidly the war got worse. For the first time, they called for volunteer soldiers, Korean soldiers. I was the eldest son. I thought, if I die, my whole family will be extinguished. I tried to quit my job at the plant, but they wouldn't let me leave. I had to have my parents send a telegram saying one of them had died before they let me go. I was seventeen. I returned to my province and got a job mining gold, tunneling into the mountain with a chisel and hammer. If you worked in a gold mine in those days, everyone thought you were as good as dead. You never knew when a shaft would collapse on you, but you made sixty *sen* a day.

When the Greater East Asia War began in 1941, the state considered iron and coal more crucial than gold, so the mine was closed. If you didn't have a job in the countryside, you were rounded up as conscript labor,

## *Forced Labor*

AHN JURETSU

*Korea became an important source of labor for a Japan desperately short of the manpower needed for its war effort. With enhanced authority from the National Service Draft Ordinance of 1939, Japanese officials rounded up large numbers of workers. Reportedly between 670,000 and 1,000,000*

and taken off to Japan. There were cases where the police grabbed a man in the middle of rice-planting—went right into the paddies and dragged him away. The police knew I'd been let go from the gold mine, so they came and told me I'd been drafted for Japan. We were hauled off to the provincial capital. In front of the provincial office, the governor made a big speech: "I want you men to go to Japan. Work for His Imperial Highness. Lay down your lives."

That's how we got here. That was 1942. Six hundred Korean youths, put on a train from Shimonoseki, the windows nailed shut so we couldn't get out. All the way north to Aomori we went. When we wanted to take a piss, they wouldn't even let us go to the toilet. "Piss off the rear platform," they told us. We had to stand there on the moving train doing our business while they held on to our sash.

We were put in an "inn" at Aomori, prior to boarding the boat for Hakodate on Hokkaido. It was equipped with everything needed to treat us like criminals, wired shut once you got in. No escape possible. People who looked and acted like today's *yakuza* came to meet us. They dragged us off to Ken'nenbetsu, where they were building a naval airfield. We were assigned to what was called the Hirano-gumi Construction Company. They never gave us an address. Never. We were just "Airfield Construction Unit X."

The governor's farewell speech was grand, but when we got here, things were completely different. We were beaten up every day. Knocked around brutally. They'd shout. "*Bangō!*" More than half of us didn't know any Japanese because they'd never been to school, didn't know it meant "Count off," didn't know what that was anyway. When nobody did anything, they'd beat us mercilessly. I'd had a little school, so I could understand a bit.

The next day, all our luggage was taken from us. "To be put in storage," they said. "You'll be here for three years. We'll give it back then." We arrived in about April, but it was still bitter cold up there. The north winds blew in from the Chishima Islands. They didn't let us wear more than a pair of shorts; they said, "You'll run away if you're dressed." Everyone worked shivering with cold. We first leveled the ground. Digging into the hills and filling the depressions. We carried the dirt, huge heaps of dirt. Next we laid down volcanic ash and stones, then covered it with asphalt. Our hands were rubbed raw. It was a rush job. Planes from America were coming! Japan had to be ready to launch planes, too! A year's work had to be done in three months. I tell you, we were made to slave there. If you treated men humanely, doing that kind of work that quickly was impossible. The *oyakata* had swords hanging from their belts, and pistols, too. They were our overseers and the top bosses. For the

smallest thing, they'd pull out their swords and wave them threateningly. We were all terrified. The rest of the "staff" had whips. They're the ones who beat us. I can't tell you how painful that was!

We didn't have shoes. They gave us straw sandals. Three sets. You put one on your feet, tied the others to your belt. When you got back at night they'd all be gone—used up. You ran around madly—beaten, whipped, pushing and carrying earth and rocks. The winds of Hokkaido were really strong. It was foggy in the morning; then the dust swirled around us, blackening our faces. On our way from our barracks to the site and back again, we shouldered our shovels and had to sing military songs. They beat us if our voices weren't robust enough. "Thinking about escaping, are you?" they'd scream.

When we got back to the barracks, there was a physical inspection to check if we had stolen anything. We were only wearing shorts. You wouldn't even treat criminals that badly. At night, at dinner time, they made us sing, "A drop of water is a drop of heaven and earth. A grain of rice is a gift from the gods." Then we had to express our thanks for what we were about to eat: "*Itadakimasu.*" They scooped up one rice bowl worth of rice and dumped it out onto a plate. And a piece of pickle. No soup. Nothing else. They fed us like this and yet we worked. Even friends couldn't recognize each other's faces, that's how thin we were growing.

At the bath, they'd yell, "Change!" and you'd run to climb in. From the second you were in you waited, crouched down, ready to leap out on command. They beat you if you were even an instant too slow. Nobody knew what they wanted. Just do it—Now! At night, when we slept, we put down our straw mats and then spread out our *futon* head to head, separated only by a space enough for one staff member in heavy work boots and carrying a wooden sword to pass through. If we talked to each other they beat us with that stick. "What are you saying? Damn you!"

Many died. Couldn't take it. Too little to eat. Nothing to wear. Just work. If you didn't have a strong hold on life, you couldn't survive. Within a year, in just our barracks, where a hundred and thirty or forty were housed, more than thirty died. In the morning, we'd see someone lying there, groaning, "It hurts! Hurts! *Idai, idai!*" When we returned in the evening he'd be gone. In Hokkaido, there were many woods, everywhere, so they just dug a shallow hole and threw the body in. Not even a telegram to their families to tell them they'd died.

Letters? They gave us a "model letter" and told us to send one exactly like the example every sixth month. It said, "I'm eating well. My stomach is full of rice. They pay us as they promised. There's no place as good as this. I'm happy I was born." That kind of crap. We had to write that. Then they put them in envelopes, but I don't know if they ever

mailed them. If you wrote even the tiniest bit of criticism, you'd be beaten until you were practically dead.

I was almost killed twice. I thought of escaping constantly. Because of school, I knew some geography, the shape of Hokkaido. I was sort of a leader. I talked only to those whose feelings I knew were like mine. Conspiring. Deciding how to escape and where we should go. One night we promised each other we'd make an attempt and set the date. The very next day they discovered our plan. They gave one of our "friends" an easier job. His friends had trusted him. Yet he squealed on us.

They put me at the clearing just inside the entrance where everybody could see me. They gave me no food, beat me, and speared me with wooden swords. There was no one to stop them. Nobody tried. I was half-dead. Then they put a straw mat over me and poured water on it. Everybody thought I was dead. Someone told me later, "In the morning you started breathing again." It was awful.

Another time the same thing—no, worse—happened to me. We were digging up volcanic ash. We were told we'd soon be getting on a truck and if we had any short pants or trousers in our stored luggage, they'd get them for us. I had pants from the gold mine that I told them I wanted. In one pocket I had ten yen in Korean money. I didn't even remember it. When we underwent our physical inspection that night, one of the staff bastards found it. "What's this? You hid money for your escape! You sonofabitch!" They dragged me off again and beat me until both ears swelled up the size of my fists. They didn't take me to a doctor. No medicine. "It's all right if a bastard like you dies. A Korean? Two Koreans? Worth less than a dog!" That's what the overseers said. I lost much of my hearing then.

At the site of the airfield, you pushed earth. If they paired up a weak man with a strong one, the cart would flip over. Then they'd beat you. Let's say the cart in front and in back crash together, catching someone in between. If your leg was broken, they'd murder you. "We're not going to feed you for three or four months for nothing." We'd come back from the worksite and they'd be gone. We knew they were dead.

Wages? They didn't pay us anything. When we left Korea we were told we'd be paid one and a half yen. We never saw even one day's wages. They gave us a ration of tobacco. One pack of Minori brand loose tobacco. But you couldn't smoke when you wanted to. You had no source of fire. When the staff issued the order, "Smoke tobacco!" everyone rushed to light their pipes on the one bright shining coal they gave us. More than a hundred men tried with that one bit. If you weren't quick and smart, you couldn't smoke even when they let you.

I finally escaped in 1943. Because our place was a construction

barracks it had thick board walls, almost like concrete, and the latrine had spikes at the bottom, to keep you from escaping that way. Some people had actually leapt down and tried to swim out through the shit. I was always looking for a way to escape. We had no tools, but whenever I went to the toilet—I went there only for that—I looked to find a place to dig my way out. One night, I found it. I dug and dug, finally making a hole big enough to get through. All in one night. I had a friend I'd shared all my hardship with. I wanted to bring him along. I went and woke him up. It turned out he, too, had a friend. Twenty of us ended up breaking out together.

It was about one or two o'clock. The staff were asleep. They'd spent all day beating us up; so they were exhausted. We stole everything hanging in their room, from clothes to pocket watches. We knew that if we were all together, we'd be caught and wouldn't come back alive, so once outside, we separated.

I slept in the mountains by day and walked at night. Most of the food I ate was potatoes. It was after the October potato harvest, so I'd dig them out from where they were stored, make a fire, and bake them. I ate pumpkins too. Hokkaido pumpkins taste real good. I walked for seven days, taking the railway tracks, since I thought they'd catch me along the roads. I sold the watch and got some money. I knew this rail line would eventually take me to Hakodate. But I was really lucky. Along the track I found a ticket. It was for Osaka! Someone must have dropped it when they were in the train's toilet. That's what saved me. My fate.

I reached Umeda station in Osaka. It must have been obvious I was a worker. I was carrying a bundle of the clothes I'd taken when I escaped. A man came up to me immediately and asked if I'd like to work, so I got a job at the Sakurajima Hitachi Shipyard. Quite a few American POWs had been hauled there to work. I found myself working side-by-side with them. They had numbers painted on the backs of their shirts. We were making pipes and fittings for ships, filling the pipes with sand, heating them, and then bending them to shape. The American prisoners were really pitiful. I felt sorry for them. But they never said they were going to lose. "What you think about Japan?" I asked. They answered only, "Japan hate. Little food. Much work." They said, "America will come to free us."

When I gave one a cigarette, he said, "Thank you, thank you." If I'd been caught I'd have been beaten. I had a friend there, also Korean. We used to tell them, "Not Japanese. Korean. Korean." They didn't seem to understand, so I drew a map. Pointed to Korea. That they seemed to understand. We shook hands.

Air raids began in Osaka. I thought I might be killed by planes if I stayed in the city, so I went to Gunma, where my uncle was doing some

kind of subcontracting, and got work. One night I was in Takasaki City when we were hit by an air raid. I learned then just how frightening they were. I ran to the Buddhist temple in the middle of the night. That's where I met the end of the war. That raid was on the night of August 14, 1945.

When Japan lost I was so happy. I jumped up and down, thinking, "I'm going back home to my own country!" I went to Shimonoseki the next year, intending to take a boat home, but I met a man I knew who'd gone back, only to return. He told me, "Don't go back to South Korea. It's even worse than here. Syngman Rhee has returned. It's all controlled by America. First we suffered as a Japanese colony. Now we're becoming an American colony." So I decided not to go. I thought, "I'll oppose American control of the Republic of Korea." Even now I cannot go to the Republic of Korea. I believe Koreans should handle Korea. Americans and Russians, get your hands off Korea! That's what I've thought.

*As soon as Ahn leaves the room to meet a bus bringing his granddaughter home from nursery school, his wife, Ezure Setsu, a Japanese woman he met after the war, who has sat quietly throughout the interview, begins to speak in a low voice, but with an almost startling intensity:*

*"Even today, my husband is not yet allowed to go to South Korea. He's one of 348 executive committee members of the General Federation of Korean Residents in Japan [Chōsen Sōren] and he can't go home unless the country's reunited. He's worked for that his whole life. His ideology is North, but his home is in the South.*

*"When we quarrel, have differences of opinion, I sometimes feel he thinks of me as a 'Japanese bitch'—just one of them—that's why he causes me so much trouble. No matter how hard I work at our pachinko shops, all he says is 'it's for the sake of the organization.' He never says 'for the sake of the family.' I never went to bed before two A.M. I rose before six. I had to save money to honor the checks he wrote, sometimes six months to a year in advance! I adjusted and set the pins in the pachinko machines myself. For thirty-five years I never took a day off. All I wanted was to have a leisurely sleep just once. We never saved any money. He always took what we had. Because I'm Japanese, he's getting revenge, that's what I think sometimes.*

*"I'm still a Japanese in my residency registration, but I've lived with my husband now for almost forty years. I think of him as if I were a Korean myself. I want to take him to his motherland, even if I must hold his hand to guide him. Sometimes he says he will live only two or three years more. I encourage him, 'Your mother is still there,' I say, but if he*

*dies here, I will gather all his ashes, every bit, and take them to his motherland."*