

# Testimony

## Jan Ruff-O'Herne

A Dutch-Australian born in the Dutch Indies,  
present-day Indonesia, 1923–2019



*“We weren’t ‘comfort women’ ... it means something warm and soft and cuddly. We were Japanese war rape victims.”*

Jan Ruff-O'Herne was born to a Dutch family in Bandung, Indonesia. Growing up on her father's colonial sugar plantation in what was then the Dutch East Indies, Jan hoped to be a nun. In 1942, when Japan invaded the Indonesian island of Java, she was interned with her mother and sisters in a Japanese prison, where starvation, malaria, and dysentery became a normal part of life. One day in 1944, all unmarried girls aged seventeen years and older were ordered to line up. In her testimony before a U.S. congressional committee in 2007, she said, “The officers... paced up and down the line, eying us up and down, looking at our figures and our legs, lifting our chins.”

Jan was among ten girls who were taken away and assigned Japanese names. The first soldier who raped her ran his sword all over her naked body. He threatened to kill her with his sword if she did not submit to him. She said, “He played with me as a cat would with a mouse.” During her captivity, Jan shaved her hair in the hope of looking less attractive, but her shorn head only drew more interest among the soldiers. The tragedy went on for three months.

From the 1930s to the end of World War II, the Japanese Imperial Armed Forces established and operated numerous “comfort stations” for Japanese soldiers in the territories they occupied. Hundreds of thousands of women and girls from throughout Asia were forced into this military sexual slavery.

After three months, Jan and the other girls were returned to the prison camp. But the damage to her life wasn't over. When she revealed the trauma she experienced to the priest, he told her she shouldn't become a nun.

“My experience as a woman in war is one of utter degradation, humiliation, and unbearable suffering.”

In 1946, she married a British soldier and had two children. Though he partly knew of her trauma, both he and the rest of her family had difficulty talking about it. She broke her silence publicly in 1992 in Tokyo after watching a television program where three Korean women revealed the past trauma of being “comfort women.” Jan was the first European to publicly share her experience as a former “comfort woman,” the euphemistic term she rejects.

“When I spoke out in Tokyo, the whole world was there, wanting to know the truth. ... They weren't taking that much notice before because they were ‘only Asian comfort women.’ It's terrible to say, but that's the truth.”

In 1994, she published a memoir, *Fifty Years of Silence*, and was the subject of a documentary of the same name. Jan became an advocate for the rights and protection of women in wartime. “At night when I draw my curtains, when it's getting dark, I still get a feeling of fear going through my body because I remember, when it's getting dark it means being raped over and over again.” She continued, “There have been times where I've been wanting to scream it out to the world and yet you can't do it because it is too terrible. Then all of a sudden, *phewt*, that's it. It's out and it's a release, and that's good.”

**Photo credit:** Instagram of Ruby Challenger, granddaughter of Jan Ruff-O'Herne, [www.instagram.com/dailybreadfilm/?igshid=4z9bwy02ufqi](https://www.instagram.com/dailybreadfilm/?igshid=4z9bwy02ufqi).

**Source:** Langer, Emily. “Jan Ruff-O'Herne, seeker of dignity for fellow ‘comfort women’ of World War II, dies at 96,” *The Washington Post*, Aug. 27, 2019.

