

# MirkinsonJudith 2023-10-26 Final

[Jack]

So I think a good place to start would be, would you like to introduce yourself?

[Judith]

Hi, my name is Judith Mirkinson and I'm the president of the Comfort Women Justice Coalition. I've been doing work around the "comfort women" for decades. I began, I actually helped facilitate the first North American tour of a former comfort woman in 1993, and I worked with an organization of women in the Philippines called Gabriela<sup>1</sup>.

[Jack]

Very interesting. And how are you feeling about this interview today? Are you getting concerned?

[Judith]

Oh, fine. Yeah.

[Jack]

So I thought that something good to start with would just be a little bit more of your background. So where were you born? Where were you raised? Like that.

[Judith]

I was born in New York and raised in New York and Long Island. And I was of that generation in the late '60s that became very political. And in, I guess... I mean, I did many different things.

I worked with, there was a series of trials of the Black Panthers and I worked on their defense. And then in 1973, I went with the National Lawyers Guild, which I'm still a member of. I'm not a lawyer, I'm a human rights worker.

I went to Okinawa, Japan and did work with GIs who were there because of the Vietnam War. Although in part of it, the American GIs were withdrawn from Vietnam, but they were still doing things even though supposedly they weren't supposed to. And that began my interest in Asia.

Then I've done political work ever since then, I moved to California. I moved to San Francisco when I got back from Okinawa, where I traveled all over the place. And then I said, "Oh, I'm not gonna stay in California. I'm a New Yorker," but here I am. Actually, the way I got to Okinawa is sort of a funny story because I went with my friends across country. And when we got to California, I stayed with other friends. I was very young. I was your age.

And someone said to me, "Hey, wanna go to Okinawa and work with the National Lawyers Guild and organized GIs?" And I went, "Yeah." And so, I applied, then I got accepted and I went back home, got my stuff and was gone for two years.

So anything is possible.

[Jack]

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<sup>1</sup> Gabriela, AKA the National Alliance of Women, is an alliance of over 200 organizations within the Philippines with the goal of empowering women, primarily from marginalized communities

So then would you say that political advocacy was something that sort of drove you towards law? Or was it, kind of, you went into law and then...?

[Judith]

Yes, no, definitely. It was being a political activist; beginning to understand sort of both the role of the US around the world, which I understood. You know, if you grew up in the late '60s and early '70s, you saw two separate things. You saw the war in Vietnam and you also were very cognizant of the Civil Rights movement and the Black Power movement. And in some ways, it's similar to people now who are seeing the war in Iraq or the Black Lives Matter [Movement] and how you put those two things together. And at the same time, there was also this burgeoning movement around women's rights and gay rights and it sort of all came together.

I think the main thing that's different between then and now is that at that time, you felt a lot of hope. There were liberation movements happening all around the world and people were like breaking out of sort of the '50s and this conservatism and people really felt like change could happen. And I think now there's just so much dread between so many wars and a fascist... Like fascism is growing in many places. And of course, over all of that is climate.

So it's not the most hopeful period. In fact, I think it's a very dangerous period.

[Jack]

Yeah, it's a fun time to be young in this country.

[Judith]

My children will tell me that, yeah. A lot of work cut out for you.

[Jack]

So how has that change over time been reflective inside your work as decades have gone?

[Judith]

I mean, in some ways, being a political activist doesn't change very much, but you become much more aware of all the different layers of stuff that needs to happen. But political change still comes in the same way. I think it's probably still come in the same way for hundreds of years.

It's a combination of being in the streets and being in like the halls of power and how those things combine and convincing people. And at the same time, one's understanding just deepens and deepens about how things work.

[Jack]

So, I hope you don't mind, but I kind of want to turn it back towards your work with the Comfort Women.

[Judith]

Yes, I don't mind. I don't mind at all.

[Jack]

But since we were talking about your past—going to Okinawa and things like that—I was wondering: how did you first hear about the Comfort Women and how was it presented? Was it presented as more of an Asian issue or a women's rights/human's rights issue?

[Judith]

Because I went to Okinawa, as I told you, I was very interested in Asia and especially about the issue of women in Asia and women's rights and the relationship between that and the United States and militarism. And I was invited to work... In 1986, I was invited to work with Gabriela, which is the National Coalition of the Philippines, to come to a big conference.

It just so happened that that happened exactly at the same moment as People's Power.<sup>2</sup> Like People's Power happened the day we were supposed to leave for the airport. And then we thought, "Okay, so we're not gonna go."

And then the next day they said, "Come." And through Gabriela... Philippines... Well, in 1991, Hak-Sun Kim in Korea<sup>3</sup>, she wasn't the first person to come out publicly about the Comfort Women. Actually, someone had come out in Japan many years earlier, but nobody paid any attention.

But the thing about Hak-Sun Kim is that there was a burgeoning women's movement in Asia and in Korea. And so, they pushed her. Everybody... It wasn't like it was a secret that there had been Comfort Women.

I mean, it was hundreds of thousands of women. You can't keep that a secret. But because of the stigma and shame of women—the irony that when women get raped, it's their stigma, not that of the men—people didn't wanna talk about it.

But because of the women's movement and sort of a growing awareness about rape and gender violence, they pushed her to come out. And she did in 1991. As a result of that, women throughout Asia began to talk about what had happened.

And in the Philippines, Gabriela began to look for women, because people knew that it happened to women in the Philippines. And so, they began to push for that. And that's how I first learned about it in 1992.

And they formed an organization that still exists today called Lila Filipina. And the other thing is that they made the connection between what had happened to Comfort Women and sort of the use of women in tourism and economically throughout Asia, and then how that has led to sex trafficking. And labor trafficking of women.

And in the Philippines, that's a huge issue. So, all of that happened and that's how I learned about it.

[Jack]

Yeah. And so, what did your work look like in just dealing with these sort of issues before joining the Comfort Women Justice Coalition?

[Judith]

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<sup>2</sup> Referring to the People Power Revolution, which took place in the Philippines in 1986 and unseated dictator Ferdinand Marcos.

<sup>3</sup> Kim Hak-sun was the first woman in Korea to come out publicly with her history of sexual slavery in 1991 and encouraged many others to follow suit. She filed a lawsuit against the Japanese government later that same year which she unfortunately passed away before it was resolved. She was a leader amongst the Comfort Women justice movement and for women's right in South Korea.

Well, we did a lot of—I guess, in Gabriela—we did a lot of work sort of like we did this tour, we did education. We had this campaign called the Purple Rose Campaign against trafficking. We really pushed the issue.

I mean, I think that we were one of the organizations that actually made the issue of Comfort Women a much more broad issue, even though still—to this day—most people don't know about it, but we really did that. And then I particularly began to work around the broader issue of militarism and gender violence. And then we did this huge event.

In 2004, we did this huge event called Women's Peace Day, in which women from all over Asia and their allies talked about the relationship between militarism and Asian women and also the Comfort Women. And so that was also in the Bay Area. So that broadened it more.

And so, through that, we forged a lot of relationships between each other. And that came in handy when in 2014 and 2015, women, a bunch of people in something called the Rape of Nanjing Coalition began to talk about building a memorial to the Comfort Women in San Francisco. And people who I had worked with called me and said, "Will you come and testify in support of a statue to the Comfort Women?" And quite frankly, I was, "What? Who's gonna be opposed to a statue about the Comfort Women? It's like being opposed to the Holocaust. This is ridiculous. It's a no brainer." But I really didn't know about sort of the huge right wing and Japanese historical denialism that was there.

And so, what I learned [was that] the Japanese government—through the consulate and Japanese right wingers—were busing people up from Los Angeles and other places to oppose this statue. And we had this sort of raucous... In San Francisco, you can do public comment and hundreds of people came to this meeting and you can look at it on video – it's insane! And so, we had to wage this huge campaign, and of course it passed in the end.

And then we built—had to build—the statue, and through the statue... It's interesting because in the beginning, I think people just thought of it as, "Oh, we'll build a statue, this is to these women and it was horrible what happened to them." But it's through the building of the statue and because of the different interests that we all had, I think we've so much expanded our knowledge about gender violence, about the rise of historical denialism, about sort of the right wing, *semi*-fascist government in Japan and the relationship to all these things. So, I think it's been an amazing journey.

[Jack]

Yeah, so yeah, the column of strength was very interesting.

[Judith]

Did you go to see it when you were in San Francisco?

[Jack]

Yes, I have seen it, it's a very interesting statue.

[Judith]

It's beautiful, right?

[Jack]

Oh yeah, yes, it's beautiful. And going off what you said, sounds like, would you say that you expected the controversy around it before and after its construction?

[Judith]

Well, yeah, once I, you know, like sort of, once we realized there was so much opposition and it came in many forms... Like they said, "Oh, this would be disruptive, this would bring about anti-Japanese feeling." And they made up all these stories that Japanese children were being bullied and all this, which none of it happened. It said it would bring disharmony between Asian populations.

And we said, "Look, harmony comes because..." It's like the whole issue of truth and reconciliation. You can't have reconciliation unless there's truth. And the truth of the matter was this happened.

And, you know, they had all these different reasons, but in the end, and basically, I guess the main thing they said is, it didn't happen. You know, they said these women were just prostitutes, to which I would always say, "Well, even a just prostitute shouldn't be raped 10 to 20 times a day, you know?" But they weren't—you know, the whole issue of prostitution is so pejorative—but obviously these young, mostly young girls, were taken by force one way or the other.

And that's very well-documented. And one thing that we learned was that—there's this thing that it was 200,000 Koreans [compelled into the "Comfort" system]—but now we know there were probably 200 to 300,000 Chinese women who were also taken, and then hundreds and thousands from all over every place that the Japanese occupied. But the Japanese, to this day, say that that didn't happen.

I mean, to this day, they say that the massacre in Nanjing was just an incident, and they're still maintaining that World War II was a war of liberation against Western colonialism. Of course, tell that to the people that you occupied.

[Jack]

Yeah, so that kind of brings up a further question of... So, due to this sort of militarism and imperial tendencies, do you see those being sort of intrinsically linked to the sort of removal of these women's rights issues that happened for the Comfort Women?

[Judith]

Well, yeah. I mean, the thing is we know that gender violence and militarism are completely linked, and historically, of course, it's been men's right to rape women. It's their prize during war, and I maintain that men know. The irony is men know, really, it's not the right thing to do, but they want to do it anyway, so they blame the women. They say, "Well, we just couldn't help ourselves."

[Jack]

And then also building on top of that, because we've talked a lot about East Asia and how it has affected East Asia in the past. So, when it comes to things like the Column of Strength being built inside a US city, why do you feel that it becomes a US issue as well?

[Judith]

Well, it becomes a US issue for many reasons, I think. In San Francisco in particular, it becomes a US issue because we have such a huge Asian population, and we are honoring people's memories, and we're saying these women deserve to be honored. They deserve to be remembered, and it's one step. Not a big step, but a tiny step in saying this shouldn't happen again.

And it's also a way to talk about the relationship between gender violence and war and militarization, and that's very important. And make no mistake, this didn't just happen in Asia. There was tons of rape during World War II in Europe, and it wasn't just the Russians, and it wasn't just the Nazis.

There's a lot of documentation about the rape by the so-called "Allies." So this is a way to remember, but I think in particular it's a way of honoring people's... We have such a huge Asian population, and when we go and talk in schools, people will say, "Oh, my grandma, my grandma talked about that," or, "My grandpa talked about that, my mother remembered." When we did the statue, there were supervisors who were crying because they remembered, "Oh, my great-grandmother hid my grandmother in a basket so that she wouldn't be taken," or other stories like that. So this is a way of really sort of honoring that memory and also not erasing that memory. There are all these statues in San Francisco like of these guys, and most of them are horrible. Nobody knows who they are, but if you do any research about them, you're horrified that they're there.

And so this is something really different.

[Jack]

Yeah, trust me, I know that one. If you recognize Crissy Field over by the bridge, that's someone from my family that I don't even know, but somehow was deemed—I don't even know him—but somehow he was deemed important enough for a field.

[Judith]

You're related to them?

[Jack]

So to me, something is, like, comes to me.

[Judith]

Yeah, well, you know what happened? Well, during Black Lives Matter, some people took down this statue of Francis Scott Key<sup>4</sup>, who was, you know... And now in the place where it was, it's empty, and the city has put up a plaque describing him as someone, a white supremacist.

[Jack]

So then kind of building off of that, and something that you touched on a little bit, is how do you feel the US is, or more should be, involved in this sort of history and the legacy that the Comfort Women have left?

[Judith]

Well, the US is not doing a very good job because the US right now is, you know, building up the military in Asia and they brokered... There was this deal that was made in 2015 [The Japan-South Korea Comfort Women Agreement] between Korea and Japan that said, "Okay, we've settled it, it's over. You know, we'll pay a little money. We won't pay officially from

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<sup>4</sup> Francis Scott Key was the fourth United States Attorney for the District of Columbia who famously wrote the words for what would become "The Star Spangled Banner." He has been criticized as hypocritical for penning "Land of the free" while owning many enslaved people.

the Japanese government. We'll make a fund privately and then slip it to the women.”<sup>5</sup> And it's over, like it's done.

And this was done, and Nancy Pelosi wrote this beautiful little statement: “Oh, we honor the women, we hope it never happens, but this is so great.” And Obama thought it was fantastic because of course they wrote it.

And the survivors were enraged because nobody had ever talked to them about it. Plus, you can't make agreements about people without talking to the victims. I mean, that's just standard practice.

And plus, the issue of the Comfort Women isn't just between Korea and Japan. So, but then, and then Moon [Jae-In],<sup>6</sup> who was the president of South Korea then said, “No, no, no, we're gonna abrogate this agreement.” But then Yoon [Suk Yeol]<sup>7</sup> came in and Yoon ran on an anti-feminist and anti-Comfort Women [platform].

And he said, “Nope, we're gonna honor the agreement.” Plus, there was enormous pressure from the United States to get this solved. And there was also the issue of Korean forced laborers that they also did some terrible agreement about.

So, at the moment, they have this sort of troika between Marcos, Jr.<sup>8</sup>, Kishida<sup>9</sup> and Yoon. And obviously, against China, the U.S. is building up the military. They just had huge military operations in South Korea and in the Philippines.

And they're building... Japan has just 50% raised its military budget. And even though Japan, under article nine of their constitution, isn't supposed to have this, they're sort of getting away with it. And they wanna do away with article nine.

So, I think in this atmosphere of buildup war against China in particular, the needs of women, of course, are just thrown under the bus. And the other thing is they [former comfort women] are dying. And part of Japan's strategy is [to] just let them all die off.

And it's on that level, there's hardly a couple of dozen left who are alive.

[Jack]

So, do you feel a deal like that, where there is no consent from the victims, just sort of furthers the exploitation of these women for both political and monetary gain of the state?

[Judith]

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<sup>5</sup> Referring to the Japan-South Korea Comfort Women Agreement brokered by Park Geun-Hye and Abe Shinzo with support from the Obama administration. The deal had the South Korean government create a fund in which the Japanese government provided 1 billion yen. Of the 47 living comfort women, 36 applied to receive money from the fund, and 34 women received any money with payments of about 10 million yen each or ~70k USD and leaving over 650 million yen for the South Korean government. The deal and fund was dissolved in 2017 by Moon Jae-in due to low public support due to its image of being exploited for monetary gain by the South Korean government and utilizing money instead of a formal apology and acknowledgement of wrongdoings.

<sup>6</sup> Referencing Moon Jae-In, President of South Korea from 2017 to 2022

<sup>7</sup> Referencing Yoon Suk Yeol, current President of South Korea as of 2023 and famously hardline conservative

<sup>8</sup> Referencing Ferdinand “Bongbong” Marcos, Jr., current President of the Philippines as of 2023 and son of former dictator Ferdinand Marcos

<sup>9</sup> Referencing Fumio Kishida, current Prime Minister of Japan as of 2023

Yeah, absolutely. I think women are a really good example of how women in war are used. The Bush administration and Hillary Clinton used the issue of women in Afghanistan to go into Afghanistan.

But once they decided that, really, they had to get out of Afghanistan, I mean, the situation of women was the same. They just said, “Oh, well.”

[Jack]

So then turning from, obviously, discussing these issues that we're facing, how did you begin your work at the Comfort Women Justice Coalition? How did you officially start there and what have you done?

[Judith]

We began through... Basically what happened was there was this rape of Nanjing Coalition, right? And then there was a group of sort of Japanese-Americans, Zainichi Korean<sup>10</sup> – you know what Zainichi Koreans are, right? Zainichi Koreans, Japanese nationals, and a couple of peace activists, vets, and everybody called their friends, you know?

And it was led by these two retired judges who retired just to do this work. And we laugh and we go, they knew everybody and we knew everybody else. You know, San Francisco is not a big city, so everybody knows somebody. And so, we made this huge coalition and we began, you know, first we did the whole thing of getting the thing passed and then we had to build the statue. And there were a lot of... And those judges were like, boom, boom, boom. Like we built this statue in two years. And one of the things that the Japanese government... First of all, there was a moratorium on statues in public ground, but there was this new building going up. And right where the statue was, like there was nothing there.

And one of the things in San Francisco is that if you build a new building, you have to have public art somewhere. And so, we said, “Okay. Well, we'll go on this private, and that plaza that you were on,” that the statue's on was private land. It didn't exist. They were making this plaza and on the plaza was gonna be a statue and some kind of public art. And this very famous artist put in for her art, but it was rejected and we were gonna be in the corner. But it was rejected by the arts commission because it didn't work in terms of like all sorts of accessibility and stuff. It was a bunch of rocks.

And so, then we ended up in that place, but it was on private land. And Japan was always like, “You can build a statue, [it] just can't be on public land.” But we knew that that private land was gonna be given to the city, like basically two weeks after the statue was built. So we said, “Aha!” So, we got around a lot of like city controls. I mean, the city of San Francisco has so many regulations. It's unbelievable. We went through 30 public hearings to get the statue built. And as you have to go to the arts commission and the parks department and all these different things. And so we built a statue on private land. And then literally when we unveiled the statue, it was on private land. And a week later it was on public land.

And so that's how it came together. And in the process of building the statue, we also said, “Well, we wanna do... Education has to be one of the main things that we do. Education and advocacy.” And so we also went to San Francisco Unified<sup>11</sup> and got the issue of the comfort women into the curriculum. And we also went to the state board and got it into the curriculum, but the Japanese government consulate went to the state board and made them

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<sup>10</sup> Zainichi Koreans are Japanese nationals with a Korean ethnic background

<sup>11</sup> Shorthand for the San Francisco Unified School District

have reference to the 2015 agreement also in the curriculum, which was really infuriating. So those were some of the things we did. And of course, we did lots of forums and things like that.

And the other fight that we had was over the plaque. And the same thing, the Japanese were like, “You can't have that. And you can't say it was like 500,000 women; say it was hundreds of thousands of women.” And we said, “Okay.” And then originally it said, “This history was hidden.” And they go, “No, you have to say it's ‘largely hidden.’”

And so we said, “All right.” You know, we wordsmith this thing for weeks about the plaque and then it was finally put up. And originally the statue was gonna be these... We held a public sort of contest about what the statue would look like. And a whole bunch of people submitted designs – even famous architects and designers. And then we saw this one and it was three women. And one of the things we had a big debate about who would be on the statue.

And we decided it would be the women from the largest, where the largest number of girls and women had been recruited. And then our project manager said, why don't you have a statue of Hak-Sun Kim looking at them? And that proved to be a really fantastic idea. So the women and girls on this statue are actually modeled after real people in the sense that not the people from then, but we got like teenagers to come and model. So if you look at them, you can look at their faces and you can say, “Oh, I know these people. I know a friend that looks like that.” And then Hak-Sun Kim is obviously modeled on herself.

[Jack]

So also, kind of going off of the Japanese reaction to the column of strength, how did you feel slash did you expect Osaka to remove their sister city status from San Francisco due to the statue?

[Judith]

Yeah, I mean, that was like so nutty. You know, people would say, “Who does your...” because we've got so much publicity, you know, when it was unveiled and then Hashimoto<sup>12</sup> and Yoshimura<sup>13</sup> are the two guys in that they're very right wing. They're even more right wing than the LDP.<sup>14</sup>

And they're called the Preservation Party or something like that. And they trade back and forth – like one becomes the governor, one becomes the mayor, and then they trade back. So, at the time it was Hashimoto, you know, and he wrote this letter and he said, “We're gonna break the sister city relationship.”

And we're like, “And people would say...” What? All this over a statue? Like, that's insane.

And go, “Well, there it is.” Because the Japanese government has prevented statues from going up all over the world and has made huge fuss. Like they just put one up in Philadelphia and they come in, you know, they visited every single supervisor. We know they gave money to different people so that the statue wouldn't go up and all these things.

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<sup>12</sup> Referencing Tōru Hashimoto, current mayor of the city of Osaka as of 2023

<sup>13</sup> Referencing Hirofumi Yoshimura, current Governor of Osaka Prefecture as of 2023

<sup>14</sup> Shorthand for the Liberal Democratic Party, Japan's tent conservative party

So then the statue gets built. Oh, and in the meantime, the mayor dies. So then we get London Breed.<sup>15</sup> So lucky us. Then the mayor of Osaka says, “Well, we're gonna break the 60 year old [relationship].” One of the first sister city relationships. Nobody could believe it.

But of course, the mayor isn't gonna tear down the statue. I mean, that would have been a disaster. She couldn't do that. She wasn't that supportive in a certain, but she couldn't do it. So, then he broke it, but in reality, nothing really changed. But yeah, we got so much publicity.

There were articles in the *New Yorker* and the *New York Times*, and [we] interviewed all over the place and people would say, “Who does your publicity?” And we'd go, “The Japanese government.”

[Jack]

So do you think that a situation like that, as awful as it is, just sort of further proves the point that this is an issue that needs to be talked about more and more brought into the spotlight because it's just sort of being denied its existence?

[Judith]

I think this is... I feel like the issue of the comfort women cannot just be something terrible that happened in the past. That... I mean, we know it's happening now. We know there's extreme gender violence, whether it be in, you know, against the Rohingya, whether it be in Kurdistan, whether it be in Mexico – the femicide in Mexico.

And there's a tendency, I think, for some people to just look at it as this was terrible and it's a historical fact that needs to be explored. And that's true, but we also have to look at it, use it as a way of examining the relationship between gender violence and militarism. And we need to use it and say, “This was an extreme example, but what is going on now and how can we eliminate it?” And how do we hold... Like the thing about the comfort women was that it was institutionalized by a government. And so for that, it always amazes me that the Japanese government denies that it happened because in that way, they make it more.

If they just said, “This was really bad, and yes, it's other governments or other armies have done this, but we institutionalized it. We treated these women like toilet paper. We did this and we felt it was necessary for our soldiers to have sexual release in order for them to carry out their duties. And we have to change that.” If they did that, then everybody would think they were marvelous, but instead they won't. And they won't because they wanna restore a militarist and fascist government and way of thinking.

And unfortunately, male supremacy or patriarchy is so embedded in that that they can't change it. So, we have to use the example of the comfort women, not just as this was a shame on our nation or this was something in historical past, but as a way of sort of opening up the issue.

[Jack]

And going off of that, how have you seen sort of your work change over the past decade, as you see the sort of changing emotions of people where we had such things as the MeToo movement, but then we also had the rise of the alt-right. Do you see these sort of reflections being inside your work over the past decade?

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<sup>15</sup> Current mayor of San Francisco as of 2023

[Judith]

Yeah, well, you know, we look at the comfort women as sort of the first MeToo-ers. And we see it as a continuum. And a really good example, the fact that they spoke out allowed other people to speak out.

And that's always true. You begin to build momentum and it's sort of like three steps forward, two steps back. But the women who were seized in Iraq and in Kurdistan by ISIS, they came out right away, or women in the DRC who have been raped.

I mean, people are talking about it, even if in their own societies or in many societies, it's still happening. Or like there was this huge movement in Mexico and Latin America against femicide. So one example builds on another.

And of course, there's also, we're in a period of right-wing resurgence in many places. And part of that, as I said, is that men want their power not to be disrupted. And I believe that part of what's happened—patriarchy obviously is thousands of years old, like 100,000 years old—so when you begin, when you're saying, “Actually, you can't rape women,” a practice that's been going on forever, or you're saying, “No, actually women are equal to men,” you're providing complete disruption to the society.

You look at the US and all these guys, you don't know what they're doing, and who are so angry. It's because women are not catering to them in the same way. Although, of course, we still are.

But it's very disruptive. And so, the answer to that is to go backwards and say, “We want it to be different. We want to go back and have a very authoritarian, a patriarchal society, white supremacist.”

[Jack]

So then with these changes that you're seeing and what you're describing, how do you see the work for the Comfort Women Justice Coalition changing inside the coming years, like looking towards the future?

[Judith]

I think it's going to be pretty hard in some ways. I think, you know, we've sort of branched out and doing a lot of work around the issue of historical denialism. And how the treatment of women intersects in that.

And we want to do a lot of education. I mean, the irony of the situation is that if you Google “comfort women,” you'll come up with like so many articles, like you can't believe. Like I just wrote an academic article. And so, in the process of doing that, I had to do that.

I was shocked at how many articles there were. But you can't just have... It's like writing an article is one thing or having a statue is one thing. But if you don't do advocacy, if you don't popularize what you want, if you don't really educate people, then it just gets left there as a statue. Like those guys in the park, these statues that... your Crissy Field that you have no idea what it's about. So our work is to really deepen the experiences of the comfort women. I mean, one thing that we've done is we've created—we just are in the new stage of this—we created this artificial intelligence thing where we filmed a Chinese survivor and we asked her like a thousand questions and then she answered them.

And then you mix it in a computer and you film her and you mix it in a computer. And then you have the computer—like you would be right there—and you'd say to her, “Where were you born?” And she answers you. It's sort of like a hologram, but not quite. I'm sure in five years it'll be totally some other technology.

But so, we call this eternal testimony because she's 95-years-old. And so forever we'll have her as a human being and school children and people can go and ask her, “What happened to you?” And she can describe, “I was taken. I was taken out of my home, and I was brought to this house, and this is what happened,” and so on and so forth.

So that's just an example of how we are moving so that we can preserve this and it's the truth. It's not just us saying it. Like, I believe you have to listen to the women.

You have to listen to their voices. You have to hear what they have to say and think about it. You know, and there's been this huge right-wing backlash.

There's this professor, you've probably heard of him, Ramseyer.<sup>16</sup> Yeah, so he continues to write papers. Saying that this didn't happen and that if it did, there were young women [and that] these women were well-paid prostitutes and he uses the example of an 11-year-old girl. First of all, there's no evidence. Secondly, an 11-year-old girl cannot make a contract.<sup>17</sup>

And thirdly, an 11-year-old girl is a minor and you cannot do that to a minor. So, all of those things, even if prostitution so-called is legal, it's not legal for an 11-year-old girl. So, all those things, but he has doubled down and he's writing article after article, just one of many.

So, the Japanese government just is refusing to acknowledge this.

[Jack]

So then also with this sort of moving forward, how do you feel personally the future for the Comfort Women looks? Are you optimistic, pessimistic... realistic?

[Judith]

I feel...I just was in Japan and we went there because we were invited to participate in a 100-year commemoration of this massacre that happened in 1923. And in 1923, there was this gigantic earthquake in Japan called the Kantō earthquake. And the Japanese government was very worried that their own... They had just had these riots over rice.

And so, their citizens started these rumors that Chinese and Korean workers were poisoning the wells to kill Japanese. And then the Japanese government and the police ran with it and spread the rumors. And as a result, 6,000 Koreans and 800, at least, Chinese were murdered and in really horrible ways, like stabbing, burning, so on.

And to this day, the Japanese government—like at the commemoration—even though they sort of acknowledge it in other areas said, “There's no evidence that that happened.” Classic.

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<sup>16</sup> Referencing controversial academic J. Mark Ramseyer. Ramseyer is a Harvard professor who has been steeped in controversy for his latest writings denying that the “comfort” system constituted sexual slavery, with calls from his fellow academics and even Nobel Laureates calling out his incorrect usage of theories and seemingly nonexistent references.

<sup>17</sup> A reference to Ramseyer’s latest work denying that the Comfort Women existed and were instead women who chose to be prostitutes for profit. He cites a 10-year-old girl “knowingly” making a contract to move from Korea to Borneo for 300 yen. There is no proof of this story.

And in their propaganda, they say about World War II, they go, “Then we went to war and the war was going rather well, but then the Tokyo bombing<sup>18</sup> happened.”

I mean, they literally say that the war was going well. So, while we were there, we met with about 30 different organizations that are doing comfort women work from all over Asia. And nobody was that optimistic about getting justice for the comfort women. The Japanese government is never gonna apologize officially. That's just not gonna happen.

So on that level, they're not gonna get justice. It's not gonna happen. However, in the sense of the court of world opinion, they will and already have.

The UN holds human rights reviews and they just did another one last year and they criticize the Japanese government. I think there's going to be... We have this statue, statues are going up. But as I said, if it's only about like remembering the past, although that's important, if you don't link it to the present and you don't expand the issue about gender violence, then it's only half, because the survivors themselves have said, “We're not just here because of what happened to us. We're here because we don't want it to happen to others.” And they have done stuff around women all over the world, including Palestinian women. They did work around Gaza a long time ago.

And so I think that we have to... If we're really gonna honor them, then we have to continue this work in their name.

[Jack]

So, because we've talked a little bit, or a lot, about the sort of trend of historical denial when it comes to the Comfort Women, do you feel any fear with the rise of historical denial that's happening currently inside the US for other issues, for all issues, really?

[Judith]

Yeah, I mean, well, I think, first of all, when you begin to listen and understand about Japan, then you look at the US. I mean, we're taught lies. Like we [Americans] are historical denialists completely.

I mean, it's opening up a little bit, but look at what's going on in Florida, where they actually said enslaved people were foreign workers, or whatever they said in Texas, immigrants. Or look at, even yesterday, they said that Palestinian organizations couldn't exist on their campuses, and that's happening all over. You know, Noam Chomsky has this phrase of “manufacturing consent,” and we can see that right now.

They're manufacturing consent about how we look at the world, whether it be about Israel, or just how we look at our own history. So, I think that... yeah. And then I find it very interesting that World War II, which happened 75 or more years ago—almost 80 years ago—still looms large in the consciousness of the world.

And, you know, in Hungary, in Poland, and all these places, they're rewriting what happened. In France, everybody was a resistance fighter. You know, this is completely not true.

And the other thing, I mean, one of the things we did around the Comfort Women actually is we said, “You know, war happened in Asia too,” because in the US, it's totally Eurocentric.

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<sup>18</sup> Referencing the Tokyo Firebombing of World War II that is considered the most destructive single bombing raids in human history

And if you look at the textbooks, there's hardly... There's huge chapters about Europe. There's a whole chapter about the Holocaust.

There's like... There was like five sentences about what happened in the Philippines or what Japan did, except for what the US did against Japan. So, you know, and then of course the Nagasaki and Hiroshima. But I think it's one of the things that's happening is that denialism... You know, there's contention like this, because on the one hand, people are opening up about the history of the United States.

People are understanding that it wasn't discovered that the genocide against indigenous people, or the enslavement of African people were the basis of US capitalism. But then there are all these people who are like, "No, that's woke and that's wrong. Really, this other thing happened, you know, the founding fathers."

I mean, the whole thing is such nonsense, you know, but our laws are made on that. So I think that, yeah, we're in a period of great, confrontation, but I mean, look, this guy just got elected to the speaker of house who denied the [validity of the 2020 presidential] election.<sup>19</sup> He's the speaker of the house, he's third in line.

This isn't, you know. And look at all these billions being spent just to kill people. That's what's really upsetting.

We have all these homeless people here, and they're spending, you know, what is it? They give Israel \$10 billion a year, and now they're giving them more. And all our money just goes to killing people in arms.

[Jack]

It's a real fun situation.

[Judith]

Yeah

[Jack]

But with this sort of view that we have discussed and talked about, do you have-

[Judith]

But back to the Comfort Women. Comfort women open up all these issues. You know, I don't need to tell you the facts of the comfort women, because they're easily found, but why are they important? Like people will say that to me, "Well, who cares? You know, they happened a long time ago. Why are you still involved with them?" And I say, "Because this is happening now, because this is related to what's happening to women all over the world."

[Jack]

Yeah, yeah. What I was going to ask is, do you have any advice for the next generation of advocates and activists? Because as we have talked about, the world looks a little pessimistic right now, but you have obviously done some great work. So, I was wondering from your experience, do you have any advice?

[Judith]

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<sup>19</sup> Referencing Mike Johnson who was just elected to Speaker of the House. He famously pushed the "stolen election" rhetoric around Biden's 2020 electoral defeat of Trump and the consequent insurrection at the US Capitol building

Yeah, I think you should. I think it's really important to have purpose. And like, I look at all these people, you know, it's like all these young people are so depressed and having all this like anxiety.

And because the society just tells you to do nothing. You know, shopping and consuming is not a purpose. I mean, it can be fun sort of, but then it gets sort of boring. And besides who has money, or just wanting to have money, is not a purpose.

And people from your own life doing something, learning, expanding makes you happy. And for me, people always ask me that question. And I say, being a political activist—learning, always exploring, but also doing and advocating for people—is a great life.

And I always go, “And it's fun!” And you feel like you're on the right side of history. You might not achieve your goal. In fact, at this point, my partner and I were like, “This is really bad.” We feel like this is the worst we've ever seen. Every year we go, “Oh, it's getting bad.” But so it's very... So the only thing to do is to fight against it because otherwise God knows what's gonna happen, you know?

[Jack]

So then on top of that, do you have any words for why they should be, why the next generation of advocates, activists should be a part of the comfort women issue in particular, and also what would be the best ways for them to get involved inside that issue?

[Judith]

I think, as I said, I think that, the comfort women, if people are interested, well, there are many organizations that they can join. They can get in touch with us. And also, they can deal with the issue of trafficking, but also the issue of gender violence and against war, you know, and part of that is really linking issue of like peace and against war to the issue of gender violence.

And that's where we can expand the work around comfort women and use the issue of comfort women to explore what's the relationship of the comfort women to what's happening now. And there's a conference, I think happening next week, where they're doing this issue of gender violence and war, and there wasn't anything about the comfort women. And we said, why are the comfort women not in this, because they're a prime example of the institutionalization of sexual violence? And as I said, I think the issue of getting justice for them means really opening up this question. And it's very important.

And holding governments accountable. One thing we know is that with impunity, you repeat. And the only way to hold people accountable is that you have no impunity. And we know impunity is what has happened, you know? So, I think also in any work that you do around rape, that you can talk about it, not just in terms of one's own experience or the experience of your friends or in the society, but how does it work on a world level? How does it work historically?

And what is the relationship in a world that's going towards war? Then the issue of the comfort women become even more important. Because in every war, there's sexual violence. It's part of war. Like we don't know what's happening in Ukraine. And some people will go, “Oh, the Russians are committing rape just like they did in World War II.” Well, the Ukrainians are committing rape too. Because that's what happens. I don't know if I've answered your question. It's been very far ranging and you said it's about Korean history, so.

[Jack]

You have, don't worry. Don't worry, you have. It's about your experience. So then before we sort of finish up the interview, first of all, thank you for your time. Just is there anything else you'd like to add?

[Judith]

You know, I've written... Did you read the paper that I wrote on the building of the statue?<sup>20</sup>

[Jack]

No, I have not read that one yet.

[Judith]

And I wrote this other one about... It was a refutation of Ramseyer, but it's called "Listen to the Voices of the Women." Should I send those to you?<sup>21</sup>

[Jack]

Yes, you definitely feel free to send them to me. And also if you'd like to talk about them, say anything about them, feel free to do right now. Anything you'd like [us] to know.

[Judith]

I mean, one of them is just about sort of a recitation of the building of the statue. So you might find that helpful. And then the other one is more... I mean, I'm not an academic.

I'm never doing that again. But it is a thing about why Ramseyer is wrong. And one of the things that it talks about actually is that under international law, there's something called the right to truth.

And it came out of the experiences of the so-called dirty wars, which were these wars in Latin America in the '80s, in which hundreds of people were disappeared. But it can also be used, it says that societies have the right to truth. Societies have the right to know what happened.

And I think that also can be used in terms of the comfort women in Japan, that Japan is actually against international law in so many ways, but that people have the right to know what happened. And so, it talks about that more extensively. But yeah, but there are, as I said, there are hundreds of articles about the comfort women.

Like anything you wanted to know, you can find out. And yet it sort of shows both the strength and weakness of just academia because it hasn't produced... Still Japan denies what's going on.

[Jack]

Well, thank you so much for your time, Judith. This was a great interview. It was great talking to you. Thank you.

[Judith]

Now we have to go off and demonstrate around Palestine.

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<sup>20</sup> Judith Mirkinson, "[Building the San Francisco Memorial: Why the Issue of the "Comfort Women" is Still Relevant Today?](#)" in *The Transnational Redress Movement for the Victims of Japanese Military Sexual Slavery*, edited by Pyong Gap Min, Thomas Chung, and Sejung Sage Yim (Berlin and Boston: Walter de Gruyter GmbH, 2020), 149-177.

<sup>21</sup> Judith Mirkinson, "Listen to the Voices of the Women," *Journal of International Women's Studies* 24, iss. 9, art. 5 (2022): <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol24/iss9/5/>.

[Jack]

And that work is never over.

[Judith]

Right.