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Transcripts

Screened: 23/02/2009 Jan Ruff O'Herne



Jan Ruff O'Herne has a captivating lightness of spirit which you might find surprising given her incredible story. She was just 21 when she was taken prisoner in Java in 1942 and forced into a Japanese military brothel. It was an experience she kept hidden for 50 years until launching into a journey of truth and healing late in life.

PETER THOMPSON: Our next guest on Talking Heads has an absolutely captivating lightness of spirit, which you might find surprising when you hear her incredible story. Jan Ruff O'Herne was 21 when, in 1942, she was captured by the Japanese and forced into a military brothel. It was an experience she kept hidden for 50 years, until she launched into a journey of truth and healing late in life.

Jan, it's very good to meet you.

JAN RUFF O'HERNE: Lovely to meet you too, Peter.

PETER THOMPSON: Thanks for coming on Talking Heads. Jan, you were one of the first of three women that came forward and told the terrible story of the Japanese and their mass rapes during WWII. On balance, what has been the positive and what's been the negative of having the courage to come forward?

JAN RUFF O'HERNE: There's no negative at all. It's all been positive right from the start. It was the right time, in 1992, to speak out. All the comfort women - that's a real euphemism for military sex slave - we all kept silent for 50 years then all of a sudden, the three of us... I first saw the Korean comfort women and then myself, and we spoke out. That was the right time.

PETER THOMPSON: You talk about the shame...

JAN RUFF O'HERNE: Yes.

PETER THOMPSON: ..that you and hundreds of thousands of women carried about this. On the other hand, there's the truth. There's a seesaw between shame and truth. Is the truth winning?

JAN RUFF O'HERNE: The truth is winning now. Yes. The truth is winning. Because, all of a sudden, after 50 years we had the courage to shed the shame.

PETER THOMPSON: What did it mean for your family, you coming forward?

JAN RUFF O'HERNE: My family supported me in every way. It was wonderful for them that I told this story, you know? My daughters were so proud of me. Carol said, "Mum, I wish you would have told me this before. I could have put my arms around you. Why couldn't you have told us before?" But now I've told the story and it brought our family so very, very close.

PETER THOMPSON: Well, you can't have been sure, when you did come forward, even with your own family, that people would accept what you said, and would accept you.

JAN RUFF O'HERNE: It was a risk I had to take, but I was afraid. Then to have the enormous relief when I had spoken out to be received back among my friends and my parish, and be welcomed and embraced and flowers put on my seat in the church, when I first went to Mass. It was a wonderful reception I had, you know? Mmm. It was good.

Sometimes God asks of us, late in life, to do an amazing task. And this has come to me late in

life, you know. Without my faith I couldn't have even survived the time that I was in the comfort stations. My faith has always been the backbone of my whole life.

I was born in the former Dutch East Indies, which is now called Indonesia. I grew up on a sugar plantation estate. It was just a good, loving childhood. My mother and father were very much in love. I can remember they would sit at night on the sofa and they would be holding hands.

My father was an amateur photographer. So he used to do a lot of filming. These films were then sent to Holland, to the family in Holland, and that's why they were preserved. Because during the war, we lost everything in Java. Everything. This film was taken in 1931. That's my grandfather Harrie, holding my little sister, Finn. This is Auntie Betts. This is my Uncle Tom. This is my father's brother, Harrie and his wife, Corrie. This is my father and mother. My beautiful Aunt Lotje, my father's sister. My cousin, Luka. My cousin, Henny. My cousin, Froukje. My brother, Bart. My sister, Eileen, and that is me at the age of eight.

When I think of my youth in growing up in Java, it's my grandfather I think of most of all. Because all our holidays were spent at this beautiful holiday resort he had in the mountains. We used to often go there at weekends, but all the holidays were spent there. We had a wonderful time, there were two swimming pools, two tennis courts. We used to climb the mountains. He was just such a lovely man. I always think, when I go to heaven, I want it to be like my grandfather's place in Bandoeng.

PETER THOMPSON: Seeing that film brings back memories?

JAN RUFF O'HERNE: It sure does bring back memories. I had such a wonderful childhood, growing up in the Dutch East Indies. Such a privileged childhood, I had.

PETER THOMPSON: The Christian faith, which has been a very important thing for you, right through your life - your grandfather strongly held a religious faith...

JAN RUFF O'HERNE: Yes, my grandfather.

PETER THOMPSON: How did that inspire you?

JAN RUFF O'HERNE: It's what you see in your home that continues for the rest of your life. In my family, my grandfather, before we'd say goodnight to him, he'd put a little cross on our foreheads. My father continued that. Yeah, I just...I loved my faith and I loved the nuns. Behind their veil and their habit they looked so pious and special and beautiful. All of us teenagers, we all wanted to become nuns.

PETER THOMPSON: Well, you did! I don't know whether they all did, but you did, didn't you?

JAN RUFF O'HERNE: Well, a lot of them. Yeah. I certainly did.

PETER THOMPSON: So, you held this idea of becoming a nun?

JAN RUFF O'HERNE: Yes, I did. From a very young age. My father was very religious. He would read scripture to us and explain a lot of theology to us. He was right into it. He made sure we said our prayers together, and the rosary and all that, I got from the start.

PETER THOMPSON: After the children had gone to bed, your parents would stay on, singing.

JAN RUFF O'HERNE: Well, of course we had no television in those days, not even a radio. We were all a very musical family. My father played the violin, absolutely excellent. And my mother was a very good pianist. Sometimes we used to shout from our beds, "We want this!" or, "We want that!" You know, "Sing this!" So, we were a very happy household.

PETER THOMPSON: Did politics intrude on this life at all? Do you remember that as a child?

JAN RUFF O'HERNE: No, no. We never talked.

PETER THOMPSON: No discussion that it couldn't last?

JAN RUFF O'HERNE: No.

PETER THOMPSON: The situation you were in?

JAN RUFF O'HERNE: No. Not an inkling. And we didn't have riots or anything like that. It was just, very harmoniously living.

PETER THOMPSON: A number of Japanese started moving into the area, didn't they?

JAN RUFF O'HERNE: Oh, yes. They were getting ready, already. All hairdressers would be Japanese people. Your photographer would be a Japanese person. They were moving in fast, already. They were already there, being spies, getting ready for the invasion.

The first time I saw a Japanese soldier was when a truck with Japanese military arrived in Bandoeng and we had to all register. Then after that, the next thing was that we were rounded up and all put in prison camps. I love drawing so I made sure, in my case, I put some coloured pencils and some watercolours. This one. This is the way we had to bow. At the right angle. And if it wasn't right, you were punished, you know, beaten or whatever.

We had a music teacher there and she wanted to form a choir, so we were all very eager to join a choir. That's why all my life I've been singing in a choir. I've been singing here in Kingsmead Choir since 1964.

We often had inspections in our camp. So one day, one of these trucks arrived again and we thought, "Ah, yeah, another inspection." But only the young girls, from 17 years up to about 28 had to line up in the compound. So, we then realised this was different. They just walked up and down the line, up and down the line. Some girls were told they could get back, until in the end there was only ten girls left standing and I was one of the ten. I remember waving, you know, to my mother and all the others until the truck drove away. And then the truck pulled up in front of a large Dutch colonial house. And they told us that we were in this house for the sexual pleasure of the Japanese military. In other words, we found ourselves in a brothel.

Every night we would be hiding somewhere, but there were only so many hiding places in this house. We were all virgins, we were such innocent girls. And the horror of the opening night of the brothel has tortured my mind all my life.

I wanted to remember these girls, always. So one morning when we sat on the verandah, I got my pencils out and I did some pencil sketches of the girls.

I couldn't stand to receive flowers for many, many years. Because flowers were still associated with that first night in the brothel, when they put flowers in our bedroom. And it was not until after I'd spoken out, you know, I was able to tell it all to the world, that the healing started. And now, I just love flowers.

PETER THOMPSON: Jan, you went to great lengths to make yourself seem unattractive. Which must have been quite difficult to achieve, actually.

JAN RUFF O'HERNE: Yeah, you sort of try every trick. You try everything. You know, "What can I do?" I thought, "I'll cut off my all hair. Make myself quite bald looking and ugly." I remember looking in the mirror and thought, "I'm really ugly now, nobody will want me." So...it was amazing how it had the opposite effect. I became a curiosity object. They...

PETER THOMPSON: This brothel you were in was run by a woman, wasn't it?

JAN RUFF O'HERNE: Well, we thought when a woman arrived on the scene, we thought, "A woman will understand." We were so glad to the woman. But the war had turned her into a hard person. She had no pity on us whatsoever, so...

PETER THOMPSON: How did you girls find strength in each other?

JAN RUFF O'HERNE: We did. We really needed each other. And they sort of looked to me to give them strength through my faith and through prayer. I used to pray with the girls. There was

one Catholic girl, too, and we used to say the rosary. God knows how many rosaries we prayed together. When I met Lys after 50 years, I met her in Holland again. And the first thing we said, "How many rosaries did we pray together?" But this is what helped us get through this period.

PETER THOMPSON: At the end of this ordeal, you have another, really. You're taken back to camps, you're reunited with your mother.

JAN RUFF O'HERNE: Yes. Reunited with my mother and I had to tell her the story. I told her the first night. To be reunited with your mother after you've been through what I'd been through, to be embraced by your mother and feel the safety of her arms - I'll never forget that night, laying in the hollow of her arms, with her arms around me and she just stroked my bald head. We didn't have to say anything that night. I just lay there in the loving security of my mother's arms. Then, next day, I told her. But it was never talked about again. It was just too much. And this is the one thing we really needed, to be able to talk about it, and it never happened.

Well, we'd been in prison camp for three and half years. Then, one day, we saw some planes and they were Allied planes! And we got so excited. And leaflets were dropped from the sky, that said, "Be patient, the war will soon be over." And then, a terrible time came. The Indonesian people wanted their freedom, their independence from the Dutch. So the Indonesian freedom fighters, they started to attack the camps. The situation got so bad they had to send some Allied troops to protect us. That is how I met Tom. It was a very romantic war romance. We got married in England, in 1946. And of course, we would like to start a family. I had three miscarriages. The damage that had been done to my body during the war was so great, so I then had some surgery done, after that I, sort of, was OK and produced two beautiful daughters, Eileen and Carol.

I lived in England for 14 years with Tom. We lived on the outskirts of Birmingham and we were very happy. Then we saw these advertisements in the paper. So, we became what we now call Ten Pound Poms. This was in 1960, and we have never regretted coming to Australia.

PETER THOMPSON: That must have been such a turnaround from the life that you'd endured during the war, to actually find someone whom you could love.

JAN RUFF O'HERNE: It was, and what was the most wonderful thing was that, when we started to fall in love - it was a very short courtship - but when we knew we were falling in love...

PETER THOMPSON: Funny sort of courtship.

JAN RUFF O'HERNE: ..I had to tell Tom my story, I felt. I had to tell him what happened. And it didn't make any difference to Tom at all.

PETER THOMPSON: In a way, it seems like that must have been the moment that locked in a lifelong love.

JAN RUFF O'HERNE: Yes, it did.

PETER THOMPSON: That acceptance of you.

JAN RUFF O'HERNE: Yes, it was. Total acceptance. And he was so... such a gentle person. Yeah.

PETER THOMPSON: Jan, not everyone did accept your story. Because you went forward and told a priest that you'd held this long-held idea about becoming a nun.

JAN RUFF O'HERNE: Yeah. I told him, "I still want to become a nun, I feel I still have a vocation, I want to enter the religious life." I remember his words. I can still remember word for word. He said, "Under the circumstances, I think it's better that you not become a nun." And that made me feel, you know, so terrible. I was still soiled. I was still dirty. I was different. I was not good enough. And this is when Tom - when I told Tom what had happened to me, just the opposite happened. Tom listened to my story, and when I finished my story he says, "You're beautiful." And it didn't make any difference to him. And that is why it was so precious.

When I met Tom, I realised straight away his love for music, and it's the same in our family, I grew up with music. Of course, this is Tom's clarinet, God bless him. I can never part with this. I can just see him playing it, putting it together, getting it ready, putting in the mouthpiece, you know? Licking it first. We used to play together, me on the piano and he on the clarinet, which was a lot of fun.

In 1975, our whole life was just turned upside-down. Tom was crossing the road by the traffic lights and knocked down. When I got to the hospital he was just lying there, in a coma. Tubes going everywhere, you know, and they told me that he had severe brain damage. He never picked up his clarinet again. It just wasn't there anymore. Tom died in 1995, 20 years after he had the accident.

Tom was the only one that knew my secret, until I spoke out in 1992. In Tokyo, in 1992, there was an international forum on Japanese war crimes. And they wanted witnesses to speak at this forum and I was the first European woman to speak out.

"Even after almost 50 years, I still experience this feeling of total fear going through my body and through all my limbs, burning me up."

My son-in-law at the time, Ned Lander, wanted to make the documentary '50 Years Of Silence'. So we went to Holland, and it was all arranged there to meet with some of the other Dutch girls that had been with me in the same house. It's very healing for me.

PETER THOMPSON: When you came forward with your story, along with the other women, and were able to embrace the other women, how did that allow you to move on then? When you say you still have nightmares about it.

JAN RUFF O'HERNE: Yeah, it does. It helps you to move on and healing starts. But it doesn't take away the damage that's been done, that you carry within you. I mean, I had the nightmare just about a week ago, you know? You wake up and you've been through it again. This has never left me.

PETER THOMPSON: That first time in Tokyo, when you - and you've been there three times - when you looked at the Japanese as they heard your stories, they heard the story of the other women. What did you see? What responses did you see?

JAN RUFF O'HERNE: Well, when I spoke out in Japan, the first thing I told the Japanese people was that I didn't come with hate and anger. To prove that I'd come with forgiveness I had brought a wreath of forgiveness with me all the way from Australia. My daughter, Carol and myself, we made this wreath out of Australian wildflowers, and it was a wreath of forgiveness and I told the Japanese people and the media that I wanted to lay this at the tomb of the Japanese Unknown Soldier. Then I met this new generation of young Japanese people that were so generous and so kind and so good. I was received absolutely marvellously, I was given gifts. I felt that there's a new generation that wants to know the truth.

PETER THOMPSON: Of course, you didn't just tell your story in Tokyo, you went to Washington. Did that take you by surprise?

JAN RUFF O'HERNE: I was invited to speak at the Congressional Meeting in Washington. That was the pinnacle of it all. In my old age, I can still pull it off!

“I have forgiven the Japanese for what they did to me. But I can never forget.”

What was so amazing about the Washington event was for the first time a government found it important enough to take up the issue of the comfort women and ask Japan to officially apologise. This had never happened before.

When Random House approached me, when I came back from Washington, to revise the book, I jumped at the chance. I had more time. I had done so much over the last 15 years that, you know, there was so much more to write about.

It's a wonderful feeling to have the church so close. The church is my whole social life. I love being involved. People often ask me, how long have I been making these banners. I've been making them for years, it's become quite a hobby and I love doing it. The banners are usually in connection with the gospel of that Sunday. So, I've got a different banner for every Sunday. This

is one of my favourite banners. It speaks of God's love. We see God's love in all creation. I'm a secular Franciscan, and like St Francis, I love animals and birds especially, and flowers. And we can see God all around us if we just look at nature.

When I look at my granddaughter, I remember when she was 21, the same age that I was so brutally abused by the Japanese. I looked at her and I thought, "I couldn't imagine anything happening to her that happened to me." And now, I'm going to be a great-grandmother. All you wish for is for them to live in a world of peace, and that's why we've got to tell our stories.

PETER THOMPSON: It would be impossible to watch this program and not ask yourself, as a viewer, "How could I possibly endure such a thing? How would have I come out?" So, why did you come out of this so strongly?

JAN RUFF O'HERNE: I don't know. Well, I don't know. I'm just a happy person, I suppose. And life is beautiful. If you see life as beautiful, then it IS beautiful. And, you know, in all the pain and suffering, you can still come out of it beautiful. There is always something to celebrate.

PETER THOMPSON: Jan, it's been wonderful talking to you.

JAN RUFF O'HERNE: It's been a pleasure talking to you. Thank you, thank you very much.

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