Living Without School

Confessions of a Refuser

By Ota Mallku

Ota Mallku, a 16-year-old school refuser, is probably the youngest contributor yet to AMPO. In this essay, he gives us a vivid view of the social and psychological pressures under which children find themselves when they consider not going to school, and argues for the importance of self-rule by children. His given name, Mallku, means "condor" in the Quechuan language.

During the last few years, a myriad of problems have surfaced in Japan's schools, and have become major social problems. Small problems like bullying, violence, physical punishment, managed education, the uniform system which recognizes no individuality, and then recently, the problem of children refusing to go to school.

In Japan, where nearly 100% of children attend school, it is considered a normal thing to do, but for some pupils it becomes impossible to bear, and they stop. When they reach a point where they no longer go at all, they become known as "refusers." The Ministry of Education's estimate is that there are 65,000, and the number is rapidly increasing. I am one of these children.

In order to understand why I started hating school and stopped going, we have to go back to my sixth year of elementary school, when I was 12 years old. My family moved to a new school district that year, and I entered a new school.

My problem was that I found it impossible to get along with my homeroom teacher. He had an attitude toward me, toward the other pupils, and I think toward children in general, of looking down on us, or treating us with scorn. At that time, and still today, I have great difficulty sharing time or space with people who hold me in contempt. It causes me great stress, even when the other person is an adult. I am still 16 years old now, and it is only natural that my knowledge and abilities are not as developed as people who have lived longer than I have, so it is absurd to look down on me because of it.

It was therefore extremely painful for me to have to be in contact with that teacher at school. I hated him, and he appeared to hate me too. Gradually, going to school every day started putting me under a great deal of pressure, as if I was being suffocated. When people criticize Japanese education they often speak of the hundreds of restrictive rules that schools force their pupils to obey, but it wasn't that kind of pressure that I was feeling. It was something psychological.

Finally, one day three and a half months after moving to the new school I started thinking seriously that "I hate going to school!" On that day the teacher hit me. Not that it was anything that would cause a bruise. I just talked back to him, and he sort of smacked me. But at the time, I just decided, "I hate this place!" That was just the straw that broke the camel's back.

A few days later, summer vacation started, and I was out of school for a month and a half. On the first day of the new term, September 1, I stopped going to school. It wasn't that I was sick, or that I had to attend a relative's funeral. I just stopped going, and became what they call a "refuser."

Fearing Strangers

For the first two weeks, I never even ventured outside of my house. For as long as I could remem-

ber I'd been going to school for six days out of every seven, and on Sundays had rested at home or played with friends, so I didn't even know what to do in town during the daytime. In addition, I was afraid that I would meet people on the street. I wasn't simply afraid of seeing somebody I knew; I was afraid of meeting anyone.

In Japan, all children over the age of six, as a matter of fate, go to school. Those who are fairly intelligent and whose families have some money go to private schools. The others, including me at that time, go to the public schools in their neighborhoods. Those who don't enter private schools are automatically, regardless of their will, given a seat in the local public school. And then, nearly 100% of them go somewhere. It isn't something one thinks about. Many people believe it's impossible to live if one doesn't go, and the social system seems to declare that those who don't graduate from high school cannot have a decent life.

Under this system, not going represented for me a forbidden act, and for many other children it must continue to be forbidden. It seemed that if I didn't go I wouldn't be able to live later on, and that nobody in society would respect me. Everybody would say, "He's through," and my life would end that way, as a hated man. That is really what I believed, but I still ventured down the forbidden road.

I was really convinced that this was the fate that awaited me, and at the beginning I never even left the house. I thought that if people saw me on the street, they would think, "That's an elementary school student. Why isn't he at school?" Thinking this stopped me from going outside.

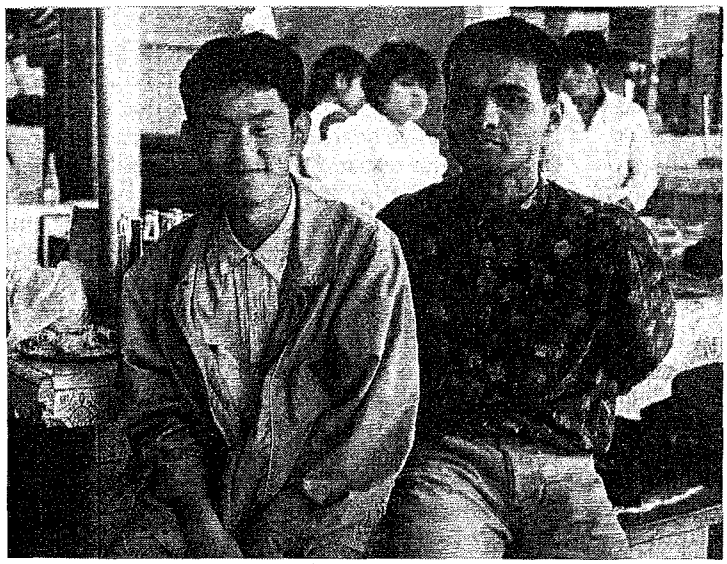
It took me two weeks to take my first steps outside. I only went out after dark, and did everything I could to make sure I didn't run into anybody I knew. In fact, I took a roundabout route even to go to the nearest station. Naturally, there was no reason for people on the street to know that I was a "refuser," but still their gazes seemed to penetrate me. This went on for three months. It was a hard time, when I couldn't accept who I was.

The social oppression against school refusers that I felt at the time I stopped going to school still exists today. The feeling that people who don't go to school are weak, or good for nothings, or mentally unstable, hasn't gone away; in fact, it's as strong as ever. There have been incidents of school refusers being beaten or even killed at private "reformatories" meant to "cure" children of this problem. Because of the prejudice, there have also been many cases of children not being able to go outside, having their lives torn apart, or losing their mental stability. I was able to break out of that state fairly quickly, but I've heard of cases in which it continued for two or three years. The reason why this happens is that it is not only parents and teachers who believe that "school refusers are good-for-nothings"; the problem is that the children themselves come to believe the same thing. It is very unusual, when children stop going, for them to have the understanding of the people around them. Finding a solution to this problem will be very difficult, but it is an urgent necessity.

I am now sixteen years old, and it has been four years since I stopped going to school. If I was in school I would be freshman in senior high school.

A Place for Refusers

For three out of these four years, I attended a place called the Tokyo Schule, where some 150 children, mainly school refusers from the Tokyo area, gather to learn. It is a place where the individu-



Mallku (left) in Mexico

ality and autonomy of children is held in respect, a place which advocates the right of children to self-rule, and it can in some ways be said to be the polar opposite of the normal Japanese school of today.

The Schule is open from Monday to Friday, 10 a.m. to fairly late at night. The participants range in age from six to about nineteen. There are also a dozen adult staff-members.

Although the range between the participants ages is very wide, it doesn't have the atmosphere so common in regular schools that "the older children are superior." It is possible to speak, as equals, to people either younger or older than oneself. In addition, the adults and children are not divided into "those who teach" and "those who are taught." I personally believe that this is very significant.

The most important distinction between the Schule and regular schools is that the children have complete control in deciding what they want to do. Everything is up to the individual: when to come and when to go during the hours the Schule is open; whether or not to attend the classes (in subjects such as Japanese, mathematics, science, social studies, English) that are held for two or three hours a day; whether or not to participate in the other activities that are held. I cannot compare the Schule to places for children (such as schools) in other countries, but I can say that this recognition of children's right to self-rule is extremely unusual in Japan. Speaking from my five-year and three-month experience in Japanese schools, I can speak with certainty when I say that the right to self-determination with respect to attending classes and ceremonies is not respected in the least in Japanese education.

Another special characteristic of the Schule is the meeting which takes up three hours or so every week. The staff and children both participate in these meetings. There are usually about 40 people inside the building at any one time, but the number rises to about 50 during the meetings.

The meetings are used to discuss a whole slew of topics that relate to the running of the Schule. The subjects run from what the month's program will be to whether or not to cooperate with reporters for some television program. It is difficult to remember exactly what we discussed during my years there, but any problem that emerge during life in the Schule, or any problem that requires the consensus of the group, is discussed and resolved here. Normally, resolution is reached by vote, with each child and each staff member given one equal vote. The fundamental principle of the Schule is that all issues relating to its management be decided by consensus at the meetings.

At time, however, I have felt doubts over the running of the meetings. For instance, we once had a discussion concerning one group of children who refused to participate in the daily cleaning chores. They had the habit of sitting around playing while other people were doing the tasks that had been appointed to them. At the meeting, it was decided that cleaning would take place for about one hour starting at 5 p.m., and that people who did not participate would have to be outside the building. The group who refused to participate, however, took to standing in front of the gate of the building during the appointed time. The issue was brought up again at the meeting since this was distracting the people who were participating in the cleaning. The solution to this was to require that the people not participating go somewhere where they could not be seen from the Schule. The group who were not participating in the cleaning were not present at the meeting. I was actually the only person who opposed the resolution.

My first disagreement was, why did we have to take such harsh measures against the people who would not participate in the cleaning.

I understand, of course, that it is only normal for people who use a space to clean it up. I am, however, opposed to the idea that everyone be therefore required to participate in the cleaning. I feel that if those people did not want to participate, it was unfortunate but there was nothing we could

do about it. I believe that the ultimate choice of whether to do or not to do the cleaning should be left up to them. I think that if people believed that it was strange for that one group not to do cleaning they should have just confronted them and said as much; I don't think there was much point in trying to make it into an obligation. Because the Schule is based on the idea that one's behavior is up to oneself, I think that no matter how correct the theory it was wrong to make anything into an absolute obligation. I made this point forcefully at the meeting. Nobody supported me in the debate, but for some reason the plan never went to vote. I am sure, however, that if it had it would have passed overwhelmingly. The experience led me to a distrust of majority votes. In the end, majority rule means that the views of the minority are disregarded.

Of course, there are many situations in which it is impossible to get a consensus even after lengthy debate. Consensus-seeking may be a very idealistic way of making decisions, but personally I try, even when I am in the majority, to take into consideration the views of the minority.

In any case, this is the kind of place that I spent the three years after leaving school. Perhaps because all I had done was study for the five or so years previous to that, I practically stopped studying when I got to the Schule. The Schule had a darkroom, so I spent my days developing my own photographs, editing the school newsletter, *Tokyo Schule Journal*, and studying Spanish through radio broadcasts. It was a much easier time for me than the years I had spent at school. Nowadays it seems perfectly normal to do whatever I want without being hurried along by other people, but at the beginning it was an incredible feeling.

I am very satisfied now with my decision to stop going to school. It is true that for the four years since I stopped going I have not done much of the time of study that is normally done, but in compensation I have done many things that could never have done in school, and I have learned many things that I could never have learned in school. I think it was a very significant experience not to have had to sit in front of a desk all day for those years. I got to meet many people, see many places, and do many things.

Questioning School

From my four-year experience, I have come to have doubts over the value of sitting in front of a desk every day from morning to evening studying things like English, science and mathematics. Of course, I do not think it is necessarily meaningless to study advanced mathematics or physics or chemistry if the person is interested in knowing about these subjects. It is obvious, however, that people who do not know these things face no inconvenience in their daily lives, and moreover, that most adults who studied these subjects in high school or university do not even remember them, so I have to wonder what the point is in studying them if one does not want to. The most important thing is for anybody who wants to study to be given the opportunity to do so, not that all people in society be forced to study.

I spent these past four years in a world completely disconnected from the world of school learning. This life that I led, playing with friends, reading books I wanted to read, working, travelling, and studying a little bit, would certainly seem like a life of meaningless pleasure if one looked at it from the point of view of the values of Japanese culture today. They were, however, four extremely important years to me. I think they were important if nothing else for the fact that at the beginning I was completely taken with the idea that one had to go from elementary school all the way to college; these years taught me that one did not have to go to school. In today's society, there is much talk about the problems of school — bullying, physical punishment, managed education, conformity — but I have little interest in these issues. I have already stopped going, so I am not interested in reforming the schools. I do not expect anything from schools any longer. It is society that I want to change. The most important thing I want to teach society is that there are a multitude of people living different ways. I think we need to have the space to appreciate the fact that there are many different people, with different emotions and different ways of thinking. I plan to do what I want to do, without concern for the road laid down by society. I do not want to travel in a super-express down fixed tracks. I would rather lay my own tracks, and travel slowly along. ■

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