

Early Childhood Travels in Japan
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After a year and a half of planning, untold faxes and much translating activity, Man Yamaguchi Allen, kindergarten teacher at the Cape Ann Waldorf School in Beverly, Mass. and I found ourselves at last in Hitachi, Japan at the invitation of Okabe Yochen, at his Waldorf inspired nursery-kindergarten of 170 children. We visited for two and a half weeks in August observing in classrooms, working with the teachers of the school, and offering a course for the teachers and others interested in Waldorf early childhood education.

We met a wonderful, warm, and open group of young teachers and their school director, our host, in a most special setting. The present school was founded twenty-eight years ago by the father of its present director. He devoted the major remaining part of the family farm to create a school for the growing population of families in the immediate neighborhood whose young children did not have a school available to them. As an employee of the school district himself, he recognized this need and was determined to meet it. One sees along the school corridor a long row of photographs, showing Mr. Okabe - and later his son - in the annual school picture with each successive class of children.

His son eventually took on the director's position and met Waldorf education in a progressive education journal some eight years ago. Its ideals and possibilities spoke so strongly to him that he began to explore Waldorf education with an eye to transforming the existing school into a Waldorf school. He began to study anthroposophy, visited the Goetheanum and Waldorf schools in Europe. A new building, reflecting these new ideas and inspirations, was created for the school.

All of this is no small task in a culture where preschool teachers receive a different training and lower status and salary than their elementary school counterparts. The preschool teaching has traditionally been taken up by young women who complete a two year training, work in the preschools for a few years, and "retire" to marry and raise their families. A few return to work in administrative roles in mid life, but there is not presently a cadre of experienced early childhood teachers in the culture, and even fewer with experience in Waldorf early childhood education. Many other cultural questions ring out strongly in relation to the needs of children and families - the role expectations of women; the very free approach to parenting of the young child and then the dramatic shift when elementary school comes to a rigorous, succeed or fail, critical educational experience. Although it was vacation time, every morning we saw many elementary school and high school age students in their uniforms, riding their bicycles to school for extra cram courses or for sports "camps", and some were even on their way to examinations.

A city of 200,000, Hitachi lies some two and a half hours north of Tokyo on the Pacific coast. On the west side of the city rise up beautiful mountains, a living picture of the artistic images of Japanese landscape which I had seen and admired. The ocean is strong and powerful, and one senses before long the relationship of this culture to the sea. One is never far from it; it offers its bounty at every meal and for recreation as well. This is a 'company town', every possible appliance is manufactured by the Hitachi Corporation and many, many people work there.

We were met by such openness and interest each idea we shared seemed to find a home for further development, often within minutes! On the afternoon that we created nature gardens together, we returned from lunch to find the sinks overflowing with the natural materials which the teachers had gathered. They were soon hard at work, creating that humming, joyful atmosphere that we long to experience in our own kindergartens. We recognized immediately the roots of their work in the Japanese cultural approach to flower arranging, Ikebana. And at our description of the endeavor, for the children, to bring an experience

of the *joining* of the kingdoms of nature in these gardens, the teachers were soon busily scurrying throughout the building in search of tiny creatures - fleece ants, bees, little frogs, characters from previous puppet stories which they joyfully added to their gardens. The entire school became a celebration of our work together, displaying their water color paintings and felting, their tiny puppets of fleece and felt, their nature gardens, and their newly enlivened classrooms, as well as the joyful tones of the "Alleluia" which Mari had taught on the first day.

We were able to see and hear of the many seasonal possibilities in this school with its well established garden offering plums for juice making, kiwis, and sweet potatoes; it's pony and chickens needing tending each day, and we felt the atmosphere of true childhood and protection which has already been created here. The children were lively and open, brought to school either by their mothers or on buses which the assistant teachers ride with the drivers. And for those of us coming from North America, we were most surprised by a school of this size (170 children) administered by only one person - its director - who seemed to wear every possible hat.

We watched the children in their classrooms playing in many ways familiar to us - house building (and always removing their shoes before entering the play houses), tending dolls, eating their play meals with chopsticks - the boys particularly engaged with block building.

The three and four year olds were more childlike and less awake than their American counterparts, with round faces and a real atmosphere of the young child about them still, while the five year old children seemed to have rounded the bend to the awokeness which modern culture and the pace of our times invites. The children were most adept at origami and string games. I tried unsuccessfully to fold a tiny creation in imitation of a five year old.

As in any school in transition from one model to a new understanding of the human being and a new pedagogy, we experienced many elements of the old and the new side by side. But as the days passed, the questions grew deeper and physical changes began to emerge. There was an openness for something new, for caring guidance and support, which made our work so fruitful.

In our course we had the wonderful opportunity to meet public school kindergarten teachers, a school superintendent and his curriculum director, public health nurses, public school early childhood supervising teachers, parents, and employees of two nearby school boards who were simply directed (knowing nothing!) to attend. The depth of thoughtfulness, the sensitivity of questions, the caring for young children and for the future were a theme throughout our work in the larger community.

We heard again and again of each individual's powerful experience in receiving interest and support from us as their teachers, after a lifetime of criticism especially in the arts. The invitation to find *themselves* as individuals, and as teachers, struck a strong chord and opened a new door for many who came.

As a teaching experience, I can share how very special it was to have a colleague and friend as my translator and companion. Man, who is originally from Japan, took every one of my English words throughout the days and found its rightful expression in a language which in no way parallels English. We were able to share a picture of the true colleagueship and support which is possible through our work in anthroposophy and Waldorf teaching. For these young Japanese teachers to experience a teacher whose roots were in their own land and whose life journey had brought her to Waldorf education here in North America (with all the additional appeal that this continent holds for the Japanese) was greatly inspiring. At every spare moment, they clustered around to hear stories of Man's school and of her teaching, and several ultimately announced their hope to visit. Day by day, their shy English (through years of schooling still unusable for communication!) grew bolder, and we all laughed as we carried around our dictionaries and began the journey of weaving two cultures into one experience.