School Bullying Causes Teenage Suicides
by Teresa Watanabe

"Grandmother, please live a long life. Father, thank you for the trip to Australia. Mother, thank you for the delicious meals. I wanted to live longer, but . . .".

With that, Kiyoteru Okouchi slipped a rope around his neck and hanged himself from a back-yard tree. He was all of 13. His suicide in November of last year rocked Japan and set off a public uproar over the phenomenon that caused him to take his own life: the dark, increasingly brutal practice of youthful bullying.

In his poignant suicide letter, Okouchi described three years of torment at the hands of four classmates. All told, they extorted more than $10,000 from him, most of which he stole from his parents; they beat him, dunked his head in a nearby river and disdainfully called him "No. 1 Errand Boy." On the day that Okouchi could not scrape up the $400 they demanded, he decided to die. Until his suicide, he never divulged his secret, even when his worried father pointedly asked him if he was being bullied and taking money.

Since his suicide, Okouchi’s school in Aichi prefecture in western Japan has been deluged with furious phone calls and letters, blaming teachers for not detecting or stopping the problem. In a media blitz, the Asahi Shim bun ran 195 articles or letters to the editor on school bullying in December alone. The issue has reached Prime Minister Tomiichi Murayama, who has urged his ministers to tackle the problem until it was "thoroughly eliminated." The Education Ministry, calling an emergency meeting of all prefectural school chiefs for the first time ever, is proposing a $4-million counseling program.

Bullying and youth suicides, of course, occur in every country. And, at least officially in Japan, the problem is declining. School suicides have actually decreased to one-third the levels of the peak year of 1979—with 139 recorded in 1993. Incidents of bullying showed a
slight increase only in high schools, with a decline in elementary schools and little change in middle schools, according to government figures.

But what seems to have struck a public nerve in Okouchi’s case was his heart-rending suicide letter, the bullies’ brazen demands for cash, and their lack of remorse. When made to apologize to Okouchi’s parents, some of the bullies blurted out that they had enjoyed tormenting the boy.

Others say that, even if the number of incidents is dropping, their viciousness is escalating. In one high school in Tokyo's neighboring prefecture of Saitama, bullies first threw eggs at one boy, then put a bucket over his head; they knifed his gym clothes and finally broke into his dormitory, slashed his chair and splashed urine throughout his room.

"The current bullying is a violent game leading to death," said Mamoru Tsuchiya, a Kyoto psychiatrist who wrote a book about the bullying of his daughter. In a national case of soul-searching, the Japanese are groping for clues about why their children have outbursts of such dark impulses. Common reasons cited are too much educational competition, too little play, weakening ties between young and old, and a breakdown of family and community. But psychologist Masao Miyamoto argues that the problem is not limited to children. Unlike other countries, where most children eventually outgrow bullying, he maintains it is an accepted practice among adults in Japan as a way to "force the logic of the group on others" by picking on those who stand out. Miyamoto and others in Japan believe that the problem of bullying cannot be solved without tackling broader social practices. And with Japan showing little sign of relaxing academic competition, changing group values, or returning to the small communities of the past, some people worry that the problem will be difficult to stamp out.

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Holocaust Denial in Japan: Marco Polo Demonstrates Insensitivity by Tatou Takahama

The recent controversy concerning the publication of a 10-page article titled "There Were No Nazi Gas Chambers" in the February issue of Marco Polo, a monthly magazine published by Bungei Shunju, sheds important light on the irresponsible attitudes of some Japanese editors and publishers.

They are willing to run almost any story, no matter how irresponsible it is, so long as it boosts sales. In addition, they will run almost any story so long as it is written in Japanese—thereby revealing their "island mentality." Confronted with sharp criticism from Jewish civic groups and the Israeli government (and threats by companies like Volkswagen to pull their advertising from Marco Polo and other Bungei Shunju publications), Kengo Tanaka,
president of Bungei Shunju, fired Marco Polo's editor and announced that the publishing company was folding the magazine.

While I applaud Tanaka's actions, I do not think the irresponsible attitude Bungei Shunju showed by publishing the article in the first place will be corrected just by closing down one magazine. More steps need to be taken to improve the shoddy state of journalism in Japan.

The now notorious author of the Marco Polo article, Masanori Nishioka--a 38-year-old physician from Kanagawa Prefecture--first tried, in May of 1994, to get a different magazine to run his piece. The editor of that magazine gave me some information about Nishioka's motives.

Nishioka was apparently upset over recent legislation in the German parliament making denial of the Nazi Holocaust a crime. The legislation was in response to a book published in Germany in 1973 by Thies Christophersen, a former German military officer during World War II. The book, titled Die Auschwitz Luge (The Auschwitz Lie), denied the existence of gas chambers at Auschwitz, the infamous Nazi concentration camp.

In a letter to the editor of the magazine where Nishioka unsuccessfully tried to peddle his article, he wrote: "We are free to believe or not to believe Christophersen's testimony denying the Holocaust. Germany's action to officially ban such a statement by law is outrageous. . . . Furthermore, it is unreasonable that the media reported nothing about the contents of the book but reported only on the German parliament's action to ban anti-Semitic remarks." Along with his letter, Nishioka sent the editor a copy of an English-language edition of Christophersen's book.

According to Nishioka, Christophersen--a German lieutenant during World War II--had close contacts with Jews, Poles, and Russians interned at Auschwitz where they were engaged in farming and other work. In his book, he wrote that there were no gas chambers at Auschwitz and that no massacres of Jews ever took place.

Nishioka became interested in Christophersen's book and began doing more research on the Holocaust. He wrote several articles based on his research and sent them to my editor friend. In one of these articles Nishioka claimed he would return his medical license to the authorities and quit his job if any reader could prove there were gas chambers at Auschwitz.

However, my editor friend refused to run any of Nishioka's articles, after considering the impact such articles would have on society. He had a hunch, he said, that publishing such stories would have grave consequences. As a result, Nishioka went looking for other publishers. He reportedly worked very hard trying to urge the publishers of an English-language magazine and weekly magazines in Japan to run his articles. Eventually, Marco Polo decided to publish him in its February 1995 issue.
Some would classify Nishioka, who devoted so much of his time to something that had nothing to do with his job, as a "crank." But one wonders what kind of journalistic rules or principles the editors of Marco Polo followed.

Bungei Shunju is a major publisher, a leader in the industry since before World War II, and Marco Polo had a healthy circulation of 250,000. Its editor ran Nishioka's article in a relatively low-key way, probably aware of the inflammatory nature of the piece and not wanting to spark a major controversy. But judging from Bungei Shunju's decision to fire the editor and close down the magazine after hearing objections from Jewish organizations, the publisher apparently did not have much confidence in Nishioka's claims from the outset.

That is one possibility. Another possibility is that the publisher may have thought the controversy would not spread overseas since Marco Polo is a Japanese-language magazine. The incident may indicate that Japanese magazine publishers do not really care what people outside of Japan think of them, amid the currently intense competition for readers and advertising revenue. In other words, they may think only that any story that boosts circulation--and as a result brings in more advertising--is a good story.

This kind of shameless thinking is not limited to Marco Polo; it is rampant today in the Japanese magazine industry, as is evidenced by the many weekly magazines that carry nude photos and publish "guides" to sex clubs. The ignorance and shamelessness of the Marco Polo editor who decided to publish the questionable claims of an eccentric, amateur researcher represents just the tip of the iceberg of irresponsible journalism in this irresponsible country, Japan.

The Nazi Holocaust and the existence of gas chambers at Auschwitz are historical facts that we must never forget.

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