

## Wilderness House Literary Review 5/2

Don MacLaren

### The American Club and the Vermin of the Wilderness

*Author's note: The events described in this story are true and verifiable, but there are some minor alterations in names, places, dates and situations.*

I began to work for Mr. Konno and Mr. Sugimoto at the American Club English School, in Utsunomiya, about 75 kilometers north of Tokyo, in 1991. I was assigned to teach in various factories and family-run cram schools, in addition to working at four different branch schools of the American Club. I took trains almost every day all over a fifty mile radius, from as far north as Nikko, in northern Tochigi Prefecture to as far south as Koga – a city in northern Ibaraki Prefecture. “You make more money for the school than anyone else,” the head *gaijin* (foreigner) instructor told me one day. “Keep up the good work!”

Though I appreciated the compliment, I believe that the problems I outline below largely stem from the fact that in order for the school to survive its focus had to be on making money, rather than on education. Thus, it was not so much a school, as a business.

In addition, to traveling around the Northern Kanto area of Japan to teach English, I began working at an affiliated *senmon gakkou*, something like a two-year community college or trade school in the U.S., in April 1994. Both the American Club and the *senmon gakkou* were owned by Sugimoto, a big man by both Japanese and western standards. Sugimoto was a former professional boxer and had a black belt in karate, but a different style of karate than that which I had begun studying shortly after I arrived in Japan.

One day in early June 1994, Konno, a man (like me) in his mid-30s with a receding hairline (also like me) who seemed to always carry a Marlboro regular in his hand (unlike me), came in the office in Utsunomiya while we were preparing our classes. “Don, there’s something I want to tell you,” he said. “The students at IBL (International Business and Language *Senmon Gakkou*) really like your classes.” I was pleased to hear the news, but was too busy planning my next lesson to pay his compliment much heed. “And one other thing. Uhh, what was it?...Oh yeah, congratulations on getting your black belt in karate.” He lit the Marlboro and exhaled, smiling at me as he did so.

A few weeks later, on a very hot, humid day, I wrote out a check, my final check, to American Express. The check would pay off the last of the \$5,000 I had owed on my credit card when I arrived in Japan in 1991. In addition, there was \$6,000 I owed Visa and Master Card, when I arrived in country, which I was about to pay off as well – ignoring advice I often got from people to either declare bankruptcy or just disregard my credit card bills.

When I put my pen down I walked outside, got on my bicycle, sped past rice fields to the karate *doujou* (training center), went through a hard

## Wilderness House Literary Review 5/2

workout, sped home on my bicycle, showered, changed into my clothes, sped to Oyama train station, several kilometers from my apartment, rode the train to Utsunomiya, about 25 kilometers north, then sped from the Utsunomiya train station to the American Club/IBL on another bicycle - which I kept locked up in the rack next to the station.

\*

I was dripping with sweat, and the only thing that kept my spirits up was that it was payday. As I walked into the door of the teachers' office I realized I'd forgotten to mail my check to American Express. But anyway, my credit cards were nearly paid off by that time, and I figured I could have them paid off completely by my 35th birthday - which was to come in a few weeks.

Though it was payday I hadn't yet had time to go to the bank to get my money. (Japanese companies deposit employees' pay directly into their bank accounts.) I was rather surprised when Konno came up to me as I sat at my desk, patted me on my back and asked "How much money do you need, Don?"

"Well, the money's going into the bank today, isn't it?" I asked. He shook his head "no," and lit a Marlboro regular.

"Tell me how much money you need," he said, after he exhaled. I was happy to see he was smoking Marlboros, knowing that with each drag he took he was eroding the US trade deficit.

"Well, when's the money going into the bank?" I asked.

"I don't know," he said.

\*

We eventually did get paid - two days late - and got paid late the next two paydays as well.

Later I called Konno and told him that I was worried about the future of the American Club because of the pay problems. I said I wanted to stay in Japan until at least March 1995, when my contract ended.

"Is there was any danger of the company going bankrupt?" I asked.

"*Nani o yutteiru, kimi?*" he asked, incredulously, telling me 'what the fuck are you talking about, boy?'

But he already knew what I was talking about. I answered him with silence, a common form of communication in Japan. The only thing he could think of to break it was "If you were the president of the company, what would you do?"

"If I were the president of the company I would pay my employees on time," I said as I mentally calculated the student loan debts I was still paying off. The calculation had reached \$11,000 by the time the conversation ended.

\*

Eventually, by October 1994, pay was so late it seemed we might never

## Wilderness House Literary Review 5/2

get paid. By this time I'd started calling and visiting various organizations asking for advice and help. Countless hours of conversations with the Labor Standards Office, the National Union of General Workers, and other organizations took place in Japanese. I contacted all the employees and tried to organize them to seek our back wages as a group, which is what all the organizations I had consulted with suggested I do. We finally received three months in back pay in court, on December 26<sup>th</sup>, 1994.

Though the experience was a distasteful one, after my networking and negotiations with labor unions, lawyers, and government offices I thought it would be a waste for me to go back to the States. I felt that experience would help me to get a job in Japan, and I had met enough good people during the course of that experience so that the prospect of staying in Japan seemed desirable.

I also thought that because of the experience I had a story to tell, and I began to jot down notes for a book about my time in Japan. But as so often happens in life, just as I finished one chapter, unbeknownst to me, another, more dramatic one was incubating.

In March 1995, when my contract with the American Club ended I found a job in Nagano Prefecture, a mountainous area northwest of Tokyo. I worked six or seven days a week, an average of 12 hours a day, though I was never paid overtime. For the most part I had to install insulation in houses. The insulation fibers got into my clothes, hair, eyes and skin and gave me a hacking cough. Installing insulation was not what I had in mind when I had been told in the interview that I would be working as an interpreter and in sales. I shared a small house with a group of carpenters from Canada and the U.S. It was filthy. After they left I discovered that some of my possessions were missing.

As soon as I got my visa renewed in early June 1995 I quit the company in Nagano and moved to Tokyo, planning to try my luck there.

\* \* \*

The period from June to August 1995 has always struck me as special - a turning point in my life - though it is difficult to put my finger on why. Perhaps it is because I had moved to Tokyo without a job lined up, or because of the area I lived, a neighborhood I thought romantic - with its narrow alleys and old buildings. Perhaps it was because I was alone, but never lonely, partly because I was compiling more and more notes for a book. Or perhaps it was because I was about to get a job that actually seemed like it could be a career for me, instead of all the other jobs I'd had up to that point in my life, which only seemed to be like a bridge to something else.

I also felt good about myself, having organized employees, engineering a lawsuit against the English school I'd worked for and seeing it through to a successful conclusion.

\*

I arrived at Ueno Station in Tokyo on a train from the Nagano countryside and put my bags in a coin locker. I walked around in the hot sun and muggy heat, looking at the pretty legs of the OLs ("office ladies") as they

## Wilderness House Literary Review 5/2

moved through the streets in their skirt and blouse uniforms. As the sun began to set, the oppression of the mugginess began to wear off. I walked into a restaurant in Ueno Station and had curry rice and a beer - a typical meal for a male commuter in Tokyo. "Well, I've got the rest of my life ahead of me," I said to myself. "Where am I going to go?"

I went to Ueno Park and drank another beer that I bought from a vending machine as I looked at more pretty girls walking in front of the large pond in the park. A beautiful Japanese woman I'll call Ms. Narita, who had brought joy to my life before departing for a new life outside Japan, came to mind. "Where has she gone? What road has she taken in life?" I asked myself out loud. One of the pretty girls looked at the *gaijin* talking to himself. I smiled at her and she smiled back. I realized that the last day I had seen Ms. Narita, three and a half years previous, in January 1992, we had sat on the same bench I was sitting on that day in June 1995.

A couple of weeks after arriving in Tokyo I got a job at an English school, but continued to look for another job. I found one at a trading company in Fuchu-shi, a district known for the green of its parks and trees, the Tokyo Horse Race Track, and one of the largest prisons in Japan. I was to work as a writer and translator for this company that imported products, mainly from the US. In the interview I met the president of the company, Mr. Yamato, a man who spoke good English, and said he'd lived in the U.S. for a long time. He was an elderly man and seemed very pleasant. During the interview he also mentioned that he had been interned in one of the infamous concentration camps in the U.S. during World War II. I liked him.

I asked about what benefits the company had. Yamato and the directors who interviewed me said I could expect a minimum 10% raise my first year with the company, health insurance that would even cover me during vacations I might take overseas, and a good pension plan. I thought it sounded like a good deal and, as required by Immigration, signed a contract to work there.

\*

Before beginning work at the company in Fuchu-shi, I took a ten day vacation in the Philippines - my first trip to the Philippines since 1982, when I'd been in the Navy. I spent most of my time in Manila, but also made a trip to Batangas, a town on the coast, south of Manila, to the island of Boracay, and to Olongapo, on Subic Bay (where my ship, the USS *Coral Sea* had moored when I was in the Navy). In Batangas a man with a severe case of pox sat down next to me and ordered a whiskey while I drank a San Miguel beer at an outdoor food stand; in Boracay I fell in love with a beautiful, young Filipina named Rose, who sported long, jet-black hair and a red and blue tattoo of a tiger on her back, just below the right shoulder. On the way from Manila to Olongapo, on a rickety bus, I saw the destruction caused by the 1991 volcanic eruption of Mount Pinatubo. In one of the dust-covered villages there was a hand painted sign planted in a mound of ash and filth. "HELL" it said, with an arrow pointing to where the bus was heading. Swarms of locusts or some kind of vermin flew about the wasteland as we made our way through it. Despite the

## Wilderness House Literary Review 5/2

desolation, there were still communities of people inhabiting the wilderness, getting on with their lives as best they could – children playing and men drinking San Miguel beer.

I had to bid goodbye to Rose and her tattoo, the Philippines and the vermin of the wilderness to greet my new job in September 1995. On the way to the airport the cab driver drove through Smokey Mountain – an enormous garbage dump tens of thousands of people lived in. They salvaged and sold the wares they found to passerby as the taxi driver slowed to avoid hitting them and the children that crossed the road.

The memory of Rose, along with the image of the children playing barefoot in the garbage of Smokey Mountain and the wilderness, made my eyes cloud with tears as the plane took off for Narita Airport outside Tokyo.

\*

Unbeknownst to me, I was to return to Japan to see a wilderness of a different landscape.

Within a few months after leaving the American Club, employees there began calling me and telling me that pay was late again. These were people the school had hired to come from overseas and teach after we had sued the school for delinquent wages. When these new employees arrived in country they found the school had no intention of paying them. None of them spoke Japanese, so they were unsure of what to do to get help. Some of them, however, heard about the previous lawsuit from foreigners at other English schools in Tochigi, who put them in touch with me.

I called one of our lawyers and the new employees took the company to court, but not before Konno had abandoned the employees and fled to parts unknown, while Sugimoto managed to legally sign off responsibility for the company.

The court agreement of December 1994 our lawyers negotiated stipulated that we had to keep quiet about what the company did to us in order to get our pay. I was afraid this might result in people being victimized in the future, but under strong pressure from my lawyers, fellow plaintiffs and the judge I went along. Surely enough, and sadly so, I was right: people were victimized again. Not only were the employees from overseas out of money, but so were the Japanese staff, as well as the landlords of the rooms the American Club held classes in and the students who paid for classes up front (often as much as a year up front).

\*                      \*                      \*

The 1990s has been dubbed Japan's "Lost Decade" by the media. The economic troubles of that decade in Japan, like the economic troubles at present, were caused by the collapse of overvalued land prices, and the securities and loans affiliated with real estate. The Japanese *yakuza* played a part in this in Japan, though by no means the only part. Their role might be somewhat analogous to those who scavenged on Smokey Mountain in Manila - picking up on the detritus of others and selling it back to the people it came from (except instead of selling at a lower price, the *yakuza* often managed to sell it at a higher price).



## Wilderness House Literary Review 5/2

Apparently the reason neither Sugimoto nor Konno declared bankruptcy was because Sugimoto had loans for other businesses he operated and the assets of the American Club served as collateral. Thus, he relied on the solvency of the American Club. One of these pieces of assets was land the school owned but was having difficulty making payments on.[1]

\* \* \*

The employees in the second lawsuit won in court, but since the company had stopped operating (and no one came to represent it in court), the prospect of getting their money seemed dim. However, after the court's ruling, the Labor Standards Office of Japan met with the employees and the employees were finally paid 80% of their wages with taxpayer money. The employees were satisfied with this situation and I felt that my efforts had paid off and my work was done. However, Sugimoto was still swarming around Tochigi, running businesses like bars, restaurants and real estate investments, in addition to running the *senmon gakkou* I had worked at when he wasn't paying us.

The end had come, though unbeknownst to me at the time there was still a snake in the grass of the corporate wilderness of Japan, lurking about, which I wrote about earlier in this journal.[2] I began preparing notes again to write a book, which I worked on for three or four months or so. I would go home to my apartment and write the notes out in long-hand in notebooks I bought at the convenience stores in my neighborhood, on the wooden table I'd bought across the street at a discount store called Don Quijote; then I would wake up early and go to a chain coffee shop called Doutour, inside the train station close to my office building, sit down with an espresso at one of the small tables in the non-smoking section, and continue writing the narrative of my life in Japan.

\*

One morning, I woke up at 4:00 AM and couldn't get back to sleep. I showered, dressed and decided to go for a walk in the big park nearby after buying a can of hot black coffee from a nearby vending machine. I sat in front of a plant I had put in the soil two years previous and drank my coffee as birds chirped in the trees above and carp swam in circles in the pond a few meters in front of me. I sat there for almost an hour, sorting through my thoughts and editing my book in my head. Then I bid goodbye to the plant and set out for Lawson convenience store to buy a rice ball for breakfast. On the way there I saw a man lying in the middle of the street, under a pedestrian bridge. A police car arrived and a cop got out of the car and began directing traffic so the cars passing by wouldn't hit the man. Another cop ran to the man to see if he was all right. A third cop came to the sidewalk and asked if anyone had seen what happened. Nobody had. A couple days later I read in the newspaper that the man had died when he jumped in front of a car from the bridge.

I continued on my way to Lawson, looking down at the ground as I contemplated both the body of the man I'd just seen and whether anyone would want to read a story about foreigners coming from the other side of the world to Japan to work, only to discover that they were not going to be paid. "Aggh," I heard someone shriek in shock and fear. As I turned my head up I heard the same person utter "*gaijin!*" in a muted voice. I was

## Wilderness House Literary Review 5/2

as shocked as he was. The man was grossly deformed, with a huge red-dish welt on the left side of his face that was much too large to have been the result of injury. But I was marked as a *gaijin*, a fate that can make it difficult to live in Japan, but one that sometimes allows one to negotiate through the contaminated wilderness of business relationships without becoming infected with vermin-carrying diseases.

\*

During the course of the lawsuits I contacted the press. Two Japanese newspapers as well as a local English newspaper ran stories.[3], [4], [5] In addition I wrote essays that were published in the Letters to the Editor sections of three different publications.[6], [7], [8], [9], [10] In the first letter, published in *The Japan Times*, I stated that "our lawyers and the mainstream Japanese media failed to clearly expose our employer for what he is, and thereby failed to prevent similar abuses from reoccurring."[11] And alas, later similar abuses did reoccur. NOVA, the largest English conversation school in Japan went through a similar situation before it declared bankruptcy in 2007, with debts of ¥43.9 billion (about \$300 million).[12] Its president fled and many of its 7,000 employees are still going through Japan's bureaucracy to get delinquent wages. (One of the NOVA employees was a fellow plaintiff in the American Club lawsuit of December 1994.) It was also the postwar bankruptcy in Japan with largest number of consumer victims (its students, who had paid up front for classes). Then, in April of this year, GEOS, another one of the biggest English schools in Japan filed for bankruptcy, after its employees suffered months of late wages.

While in Japan I sometimes read stories in the press about immigrants in the U.S. being victims of employers who withheld their wages, but for some reason when this kind of thing befalls U.S. citizens and other westerners in Japan the U.S. press tends to remain silent.[13]

My journeys through the wilderness and note-taking are just about at an end, but I have yet to finish my book.

## Wilderness House Literary Review 5/2

### Notes

[1] Isao Konno, former President, American Club Ltd.,  
Letter to American Club Employee.

Utsunomiya/Tokyo, Japan, January 1996

(In this letter Konno outlines the situation with Sugimoto, claiming Sugimoto prohibited Konno from filing for bankruptcy. He goes on to write that if Konno attempted to file for bankruptcy despite this prohibition, Sugimoto would harass Konno's wife's business with sound trucks from both the Japanese right wing and communist parties.)

[2] Don MacLaren, "My Life in Corporate Japan,"  
*Wilderness House Literary Review*, Spring, 2010

[3] *Asahi Shinbun*, Utsunomiya edition,  
Utsunomiya, Japan, Jan. 25, 1996

[4] *Shimotsuke Shinbun*, Utsunomiya, Japan  
Jan. 26, 1996

[5] *Networking*, Utsunomiya, Japan,  
Mar., 1996

[6] Don MacLaren, "Labor scofflaws often go unpunished,"  
*The Japan Times*, December 14, 1997

[7] Don MacLaren, "Pros and cons of Japan bashing,"  
*The Mainichi Daily News*, October 31, 1998

[8] Don MacLaren, "Corruption is de rigueur in Corporate Japan,"  
*Business Week (International)*, December 7, 1998

[9] Don MacLaren, "Labor scofflaws still running amok."  
*The Japan Times*, Apr. 4, 1999

[10] Don MacLaren, "The back-wages of sin,"  
*The Mainichi Daily News*, April 19, 1999



## Wilderness House Literary Review 5/2

[11] Eric Johnston, "Nova boss handed 3 1/2 years,"  
*The Japan Times*, August 27, 2009

[12] Minoru Matsutani, "Geos school chain files for bankruptcy"  
*The Japan Times*, April 21, 2010

[13] The only exception I know is an essay I wrote, published in the  
"Readers Report" section of the international edition of *Business Week*:  
Don MacLaren, "Corruption is de rigueur in Corporate Japan,"  
*Business Week (International)*, December 7, 1998

**DON MACLAREN** has published articles, letters, memoir, stories and poems in publications such as *TIME*, *Newsweek (International)*, *Business Week (International)*, *The Japan Times*, *Japan Today*, *The Tenderloin Times*, *Danse Macabre* and the *Haight Ashbury Literary Journal*.