

TALAS AMERICAN JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL FOR BOYS

Slices of Life from the Talas School

Talas American Junior High School for Boys (1889-1967) stood aloof, high above the town of Talas of the Province of Kayseri in Central Turkey, and at an altitude of about 1200 meters above sea level. Here, one could encounter a school boy, plowing nightly downhill from the Upper Campus for about a kilometer or so through waist deep snow and over cracking ice to get to the *Konak* (the Lower Campus) dormitory. The next day, early in the morning, this school boy would now be crawling uphill, by way of a frozen track treacherously blanketed by the morning's snowfall, to catch his breakfast at the Upper Campus. By the time he is up, icicles are formed around his hair and ears and inside his nostrils, and the huge bell has already started tolling, announcing breakfast time. A hearty breakfast on margarine and apricot marmalade or molasses with tahini washed down by a glass of syrupy hot tea fixes him up good for the day. He is now dried up on the outside and warmed up inside.

Following breakfast, this school boy would run up the stairs to the warmth of his classroom where he would be exposed to worldly wisdom through subjects like history, geography, Turkish grammar and literature, English grammar and composition, health, algebra, first aid, science, civics, art, shop, and music taught by his American and Turkish teachers.

After classes, weather permitting, our young fellow would be kicking around a sulky soccer ball in an amorphous football field surfaced by wrinkled layers of lava flow petrified eons before he started school at Talas. Alternatively, he would be exchanging blows, and inflicting and suffering a purple eye in an area behind the *atölye* (the mechanical shop) designated by tradition for fist duels over issues not readily resolved through gentler means.

Supper, like lunch, would fall short of satiating the ever growing appetite of our school boy. Hunger would follow him everywhere and all the time, during the day, to his bed, and into his dreams. Is it the pristine air, the invigorating climate, the soaring heights, or is it simply his body eating up all that energy and asking for more and more? After supper, he would smuggle out a couple of slices of stale bread to the study hall to toast them on top of that metal contraption red-hot in pride for having been fashioned into a stove from a scrapped petroleum barrel.

This young lad would be stoically braving a cruel weather marked by temperatures often below the freezing point. Once or twice a year on those pitch dark nights, and usually past midnight, he would wake up, in dutiful response to the menacing knell of that grand bell that would ubiquitously be guiding his entire routine (and probably that of the village folks who lived within a ten kilometers radius). He would, then, descend the dreadfully narrow and seemingly fathomless fire escape to line up in his pajamas and slippers down at the soccer field hibernating under knee-deep snow. It is, he would ponder resignedly, yet another confounded fire drill!

But seasons come and seasons go. With the coming of spring, our school boy would take heavenly delight in the awakening of nature heralded by the blossoming of apricot trees, their branches hanging over countless rivulets fording the heavy blanket of snow grudgingly melting away after four months of deep slumber. For our boy, spring was also a wonderful time for wrapping a little lump of wax around some twine and dipping this bait down a narrow shaft in the ground and wait to feel a tiny jerk. There! The black and hairy earth spider is there! It has bitten into the wax and got stuck! It goes right into a match-box, to join others suffering similar fate, to be taken up to the classroom to be saved in his desk for a pending "spider fight" against those kept by other spider herders. Spring would also lure our boy and his pals to take a hike into the nearby Derbent Valley to venture into the eerie darkness of those gaping caves to shoo bats out of their hideout. Flap flap flap the bats would flutter around their habitat scaring the daylight out of their intruders. "One should have bats in his belfry to challenge bats in their own domain," remarks one boy. The others agree.

Our school boy would have his first experiment with self-government through his four or five years at Talas. He would partake in the emulation of a participatory democratic process with all the bells and whistles of an election campaign including public speeches, posters and pep rallies. This process would culminate in the election through universal suffrage of the two principal office holders of the Student Government, namely the *Baş Mümessil* (the Head Prefect) and the *Tenkit Saati Başkanı* (the Speaker of the Student Assembly).

The *Tenkit Saati* was a forum where issues involving school policy and management would be reviewed, debated and voted on by the students meeting weekly in plenary session. There, any student would freely take the floor to express his particular concern with the Student Government or with the School Administration. The School Principal (Mr. John W. Scott and later Mr. William A. Edmonds) would be standing by the Speaker's rostrum throughout the entire session, and take the floor to comment only upon permission by the Speaker, who would be presiding over the meetings in accordance with the Robert's Rules of Order, and in utmost solemnity. Our boy knows he has an equal voice at the *Tenkit Saati* with the rest of his peers; so all it takes is just a bit of self-confidence. Hesitantly, he takes the floor, following the example of his *ağabeys* (big brothers) and makes his point about something that must really have been bothering him like the unavailability of enough sleds for all. And that does it! He is now a public speaker for all the rest of his life!

On Saturday mornings, our boy would be seen queued up for games of all sorts including Chinese checkers, authors, monopoly, chess, and dominos or for sports equipment like all sorts of balls, bats, badminton rackets, skis, sleds, boxing gloves, ping-pong paddles, and horseshoes. He would be having a whale of a time on those Saturday afternoon outings to Kayseri highlighted by a pocketful of *şemşamer* (sun flower seeds) from the street vendor, a slice or two of chocolate cake topped by a generous mound of confectionary's cream at the *Zümrüt Pastanesi* (Emerald Bakery), and maybe a flick at the *Yeni Sinema* (The New Movie Theater).

The worldly delights of a Saturday afternoon on the town would be costing our poor boy the full amount of his weekly pocket-money of two-and-a-half Turkish Liras. “No more or no less, but the same amount for all” was the stiff school rule. This rule, however, could be flexed a little bit, at times. And that would take some *bazaar* haggling with the School Cashier Mr. Edwin, whose parsimony used to manifest itself graphically in the presence of that little bamboo pencil-holder worn behind his ear, thus keeping his pencils worn down to the last centimeter. Extricating that additional half or one Turkish Lira from Mr. Edwin would surely take a hard bargain, and some innovative thinking too. It would even sometimes require a thorough presentation on the part of the stipendiary about some exigent need that had to be tended to immediately, therefore justifying the authorization of proportionate funds beyond that fixed weekly stipend. Often times, this exigent need would be a new sole for his shoe or even two for the pair.

Our boy would be back in time from Kayseri for supper, and then run up to the Study Hall to get himself a good seat with his buddies for the Saturday evening program that could include, at its best, some sing-along with Mr. William J. Griswold: “Row row row your boat gently down the stream. Merrily merrily merrily merrily, life is but a dream!” “You are my sunshine, my only sunshine. You make me happy when skies are blue!” “Oh, the aching burden on my shoulders! But to live a man must trade.” “Lavenders blue dilly dilly, lavenders green. When I am king dilly dilly you shall be queen.” “Kookaburra sits on the old gum tree. Merry merry king of the bush is he”, and scores of other songs from all over the world. At times, Mr. Thomas D. Goodrich would be butting in --in his white blazer daintily matched by one of his innumerable bowties-- to dance to the tune of a boogey-woogey with Mr. Griswold at the piano. On those festive evenings, there could even be a feature film borrowed from the Aircraft Plant in Kayseri, a spelling contest, a performance by a traveling illusionist or even by some itinerant bard of fame passing through. Whatever the performance or the event, there would always arise some good reason for a lungful blast of the Talas School cheer: “*Bombalaki Bombalaki Bom Bom Bom, Talas Talas Zım Zım Zım, Koleeej Koleeej Koleeej !!!*” chanted by all --teachers and students alike.

Come Sunday mornings, our school boy would be writing home a letter, and maybe another one to a pen-pal in some distant country during the mandatory *Mektup Saati* (The Letter Writing Hour), a weekly ritual as ordained by the School Administration, and in between be exchanging collectors' stamps with friends. Afterwards, he would take a solitary walk over to *Kaya Başı*, the bluff standing tall (and apparently oblivious to the woes of his visitors) above those terraced vineyards stretching down towards the wide plain that sets Talas and Kayseri apart. There, he would stand in solitude for a while and stare longingly across the horizon where home always was supposed to be, trying in vain to seek some solace from his seemingly incurable homesickness.

Our schoolboy would show off his flashlight --his prime status symbol-- during the treasure hunts on those bone chilling *Hortlak Geceleri* or Ghost Nights (Halloween), or he would blow off his steam at the semiannual *Kale Oyunu* (Castle Game) between the *Orta IIIs* (eighth graders) and *Orta IIs* (seventh graders), and thus grab yet another chance at bruising and getting bruised in the wild pursuit of snatching and ringing a bell safeguarded rapaciously by the castle guarding "enemy". He would often be drawn to the lures and challenges of the *Maymunlu Bahçe* (the Yard of the Monkeys) where he would be scaling cliffs, climbing a rope, sliding down a pole, mostly to land butt-first. Another alternative to outdoor sweating would be exercising at the bar-fixe or the parallel bars or do pole vaulting as coached by Mr. Robert Keller. One really had to keep in shape, mostly in preparation for the mid-May track-and-field day organized annually at the Sümer Textile Factory Stadium. The entire student body, then, would be shuttled there to sprint, hurdle, run long distance, triple-step, jump, pole-vault, hurl the shot-put and the disc or, at least, to line-up at the benches to cheer for their competing teams, the Bears, the Lions, and the Indians. This would be a day of fierce exertion and sheer concentration with minds set on ribbons to be won, red for the champion, blue for the first runner-up, and yellow for the second runner-up.

No other outdoor pursuit, however, would be more challenging than gang raiding the neighboring vineyards by nightfall for a lapful of grapes or apples or peaches and occasionally be caught red handed by the night duty teacher. Climbing the school's

own apricot trees for feasting on the green and tangy *çağla* (the budding apricot) would be yet another pastime, safer and easier, but with a downside to it: one would get a demerit if caught on the job. As Mr. Scott would be reminding everyone all the time, “these fruits were there, after all, to be ripened into sweet produce so as to be harvested and processed as apricot marmalade” by Miss Wilhelmina Cormann, the School Matron, “so that boys would have it on their table for breakfast throughout the following year”. Yet, come the following year, “boys” would have their breakfast tables inundated by a seemingly endless flow of apricot marmalade. Then, they would regret not having snatched enough of those *çağlas* at the expense of a few more demerits.

Talas was a 4-H school placing equal emphasis on head, heart, health and hand. Head, our school boy needed for his studies. Heart, he had to have if he were to take the challenges of life at Talas. Health, he better had, given the limited remedies available. The last but not the least, the Hand, he learned to use through sweating at the *atölye* under the vigilant surveillance of Garabet Topakbaş *Usta* (the Master Craftsman) and his crew to manufacture a hanger for his coat, hinges for his desk, a hammer or a screw driver for his own use, toiling in the process with tools and implements like files that were too worn out to file or vises that were too tired to vise. Other activities of manual challenge would include carving, cutting, chiseling, and gluing wood and plywood to build models and other artifacts at the Craft Club with Mr. James A. Johnson, or doing watercolor, crayon and oil at the Art Room with Mrs. Jean Griswold.

In order to enjoy occasionally the warmth and idyllic coziness of indoors, our young boy would gulp down a good dose of chalk on his way to the *Revir* * (the Infirmary) supposedly for a check-up. Once there, he would rub hard and fast on the tip of the thermometer before inserting it under his armpit. The chalk and the ardent rubbing

***With the sudden spread of the Asian flu in 1957, the *Revir* was not any more the haven it was craved by Talas boys, but simply another of those several wards in the upper campus set up hastily to accommodate about two thirds of the school population who had been afflicted by this backbreaking pandemic. The boys knew they had to brave the flu as they had been braving those blinding blizzards.**

would pay off, boosting his fever, and hopefully help him cheat his way into the *Revir* where food would be served at his bedside, and where he would be tucked into one of those four much coveted beds amazingly equipped with soft mattresses and foam pillows. There was even a stove there constantly kept hot, even through the night. This was, in fact, the only sleeping quarters on the campus furnished with a stove. Moreover, the place was run by Miss Isabella Hemingway, Lizzy the School Nurse whose compassion you could always count on. Life was simply good at the *Revir*, so good that one might as well spend the rest of his life there! Therefore, you had to do all you could to simulate the proper symptoms, and act fast to get in. Tardiness would be disastrous, because Miss Cormann (the fearsome clatter of whose hundred keys would resound to precede the intimidating echo of her footsteps down the hallway) could just step in all of a sudden to immediately frustrate your initiative, challenge your craft, and deport you summarily to your Arctic dorm where your frozen bed would be waiting to rob you off whatever had been left of your bodily warmth.

The Library was yet another haven, likewise for warming both body and soul. Here, our young student would spend hours flipping through the glossy pages of *The Saturday Evening Post*, *Illustrated Classics*, *Popular Science*, and *Popular Mechanics*, and immersing in all intellectual fervor in *The Encyclopedia Britannica*, *The World Book* or *The Encyclopedia Americana* among other sources, in preparation for his research paper. These papers could be on such diverse topics as tulip growing in the Netherlands, Gutenberg's printing shop, Hittite coins, the internal combustion engine, the Galatians who once settled the plateau around ancient Angora, nuptial ceremonies of the Kabartai of Uzun Yayla, and you name it.

All Hail Talas to Thee

Mt. Alidağ was like our very own hill. We would climb it up with our teachers every October 29th, on the Anniversary of the Turkish Republic, to lay down hundreds of white-washed rocks on one of its steep slopes to write in huge Roman numerals the

year corresponding to the anniversary, and return to our School to admire from afar in patriotic pride, the fruit of a full day's hard work. Such was life at the Talas American Junior High School for Boys near Mt. Alidağ, the triple-humped hill that dwarfed its surrounding landscape, jealously curtailing our view of the mighty Mt. Erciyes, and proudly displaying its Roman numerals.

It was a life at a school with an enrollment of one hundred and sixty boys, all boarders save one or two. But more than that, it was a life shared within the confinements of a physically and socially isolated campus elegantly blended into its volcanic environ and inhabited by some two hundred souls (school boys, teachers, and staff) forming one big family, unique in its many ways. This was a family harboring a passion for wisdom but allowing doubt, upholding discipline but tolerating divergence, exalting camaraderie but praising individual initiative, urging maturity but keeping one eye closed for boyish adventures and mischief, preaching respect for achievement and greatness but shunning feeble docility, nurturing filial trust and teamwork but applauding self-sufficiency and self-confidence, respecting privacy (as much as one could have of it) but sharing grief and glee communally. This was a family, and it still is. Its members used to pride themselves of being a part of it. They still are, like the writer of this memoir is.

It must have been the very proximity to Mt. Erciyes itself that must have inspired the writer of this memoir, as it must have inspired one of Talas' former principals, Mr. Paul Nilson, to write and compose "All Hail Talas to Thee", the School Anthem that *TalaslIs* will be heard chanting heartily whenever there is more than one of them around:

*"All hail Talas to thee
Our School of life and light
Our goal is Turkish manhood
To reach Erciyes height".*

Nilsons were followed by other like-minded mentors, Turkish and American, devoted to the cause of maintaining a school community dedicated to perfection. We would be calling our Turkish teachers *Muallim Bey* (Mister Teacher), reverently in the

archaic usage of the Turkish language, and our American teachers “Ma’am” or “Sir”. We owe our Sirs and Ma’ams and Muallim Beys (John W. Scott, Gwenn Scott, William A. Edmonds, Ann Edmonds, Veli Akay, Mustafa Pişkin, William Griswold, Jean Griswold, Durmuş Esen, Robert Keller, Dorothy Keller, Thomas D. Goodrich, Giyasettin Tokyay, Ralph Meyering, William Mathews, Haydar Ataer, William Ludwig, Remzi Dinçol, James A. Johnson, Mary Lou Johnson, David C. Holmes, Robert Jones, Faruk Yüce, Gene Blumenfeld, Mevlut Gölgeioğlu, Ruby Birge) so much for stimulating our yearning for learning and questioning, for cultivating our potentials and honing our skills, for providing us guidance at the onset of our zestful voyage from boyhood to manhood, and, for sowing in our hearts love and loyalty for the country, family and friends. And to Dr. Wilson Dodd, Dr. William Nute, Isabella Hemingway, Mary Bliss, İbrahim Ertaş, Garabet Topakbaş, Wilhelmina Cormann, Ümit Altiner, Kiymet Hanım, we owe as much for their having supported, in their wonderful ways, this great family, which we were not born into, yet, one that has remained a part of us throughout our lives.

Talas Makes Readers and Writers

One should make particular mention of yet another aspect of life at the Talas School. It was the joy we took in reading and writing.

We were subtly guided into the habit of borrowing books from the library. We were deftly made to acquire a taste for reading books, exchanging books, discussing books, and even playing book games like “authors”.

With fun, however, came responsibility. We were expected not just to read, but also to report on the books we read. And, so many reports we had to write! Writing book-reports was a burdensome task for some of us, but for some others it evolved in time into being a fulfilling avocation. Fortunately, I ended up in the latter group thanks to Mr. Griswold’s relentless efforts at motivating me to write and leading me into the

seductive realm of creative writing. I also owe to Mr. Goodrich, who taught me (the hard way) to improve my usage of grammatical forms, and inspired me to write my first 'epic tale', one about the misadventures of these two dashing lads from Turkey's Eastern Black Sea region.

As for my everlasting passion for Turkish, I owe it to Mustafa Pişkin (Dülgeroğlu) and to Giyasettin Tokyay, whose encouraging guidance and patient mentoring have left their mark on my commitment to the grammatical propriety and my addiction to the playful puns and subtle complexity of this beautiful language.

It has been fifty-two years since I wrote my last book report at Talas, yet I am still in the habit of writing book reports (book reviews, if you will), and consider myself deserving humbly of being included among those who still enjoy a good book and take a particular delight in writing.

All hail Talas to Thee!

Oktay Bora Yağız

Talas 1953-1958