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JAPANESE DIARIES (5)

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The day finally came when I was to travel home for Christmas. Fortunately, I did not have to evacuate all my belongings from Tokyo; I took just one suitcase full of Christmas presents and, just like with my November travel to China, I decided to get to the airport on my own. I left home early in the morning, with enough extra time to do my duty-free shopping and accommodate time contingencies. When I got to the airport I looked at the Departures board just to confirm things; I was sure everything was fine. It took me quite a while to realize that my plane to Amsterdam had a six-hour delay... I had to join a lengthy queue and ask for information what to do next. After more than two hours of waiting (in a standing position) I was told they were going to re-book me on the flight to Paris, as with the delay I would not be able to catch my plane from Amsterdam to Warsaw. I could not drop off my luggage, as the Air France check-in was to remain closed for a long time – the plane to Paris was due to take off in ten hours.... I somehow found it hard to enjoy the beautiful Christmas tree in the lobby, under which Japanese families took photos, neither could I find consolation in the fact that the Tokyo airport was spacious and bright, nor in the perspective of a cup of excellent coffee with my favourite cheese-cake served everywhere in Japan (lovely! I guess they bake it with Philadelphia cream cheese) or some quiet shopping still to be made... I had before my mind's eye a vision of my never-ending journey home.

Every now and then the screens flashed with announcements of further delays of planes arriving from Europe. Snowfall was thwarting people's Christmas plans. I was floating around the Narita airport thinking that my stay in Poland, short as it was to be, would be made shorter still by those wasted hours.

At last evening came. I left my luggage at check-in and in due time walked to the plane. It was packed full of passengers, but as I had an aisle seat reserved, at least I could get a little privacy. Surprisingly, having sipped some red wine and watched a movie, I fell asleep. After twelve hours of flying we landed in Paris around 4 a.m. European time. Nothing foretold the horror that was to come... The airport looked exceptionally beautiful covered in light snow. But it turned out that what looked so light and charming to me was a natural disaster for the French, and particularly for the Paris airport service. Not yet expecting trouble, I had a cup of coffee at a bar, quite empty at that hour of day, and availed myself of one of the two operating computers at the terminal. As soon as the first shops opened, I bought some cosmetics (more Christmas gifts) and my favourite *macarons*. I love them, especially those rose and fig flavoured. They are divine (and equally 'divine' is their airport price). At last, having passed all the security points, I got to the gate. No free seats, of course. The crowd was getting dense, just like the snow behind the windows. Still there was no snowstorm or any exceptional circumstances. Just ordinary winter. Some hustle and bustle began around the Air France service counter and after a while an unfriendly young person informed all passengers travelling to Warsaw in her unsympathetic voice that the flight had been CANCELLED!!! Not delayed, not postponed, but actually cancelled, definitely and without any hope. My first thought was: well, so many years of flying and this was the second time ever.

The first time was back in 1972, I guess. I was returning home with my Parents from my first concert tour abroad, from what was then the USSR. Our plane from Moscow to Warsaw changed its course due to weather conditions and landed in ... Bratislava. There we were welcomed with Czech beer and knedliky, and I felt warm and safe in the company of my Parents. We waited for several hours, and at last we took off. As soon as the meal was served on board, an announcement came from the pilot: Warsaw has not permitted us to land; we are flying to Berlin (East Germany). I guess we were a bit tired at that point; the drive to the Moscow airport had been a long one, so we had had an early start. However, East Germans were well prepared – hot sausages and fruit juice in the buffet, and latest magazines to peruse. The airport crowd seemed a bit smarter, among other fellow-passengers we met the eminent Polish orchestra conductor Henryk Czyż with his spouse, carrying bunches of flowers, evidently returning home from a concert. At last the plane took off and landed an hour later at the Warsaw airport, in the middle of the night. My Dad demonstrated his usual organizational skills and,

armed with his smile and a box of Russian chocolates, managed to find us hotel accommodation for that night in Warsaw

All this flashed in my mind the moment I learned that the flight from Paris to Warsaw was cancelled. We, the passengers, were informed that we should reclaim our luggage and stand in another queue to book for the next flight to Warsaw, departure time yet unknown. But with the luggage it was easier said than done. First one had to queue for a piece of paper that enabled one to go back to the Arrivals section, more precisely to the luggage reclaim area. How happy I was to see my suitcase intact! I have lost my luggage several times before in my life and I know exactly what it takes to recover it. So, armed with my big suitcase, small hand luggage and several duty free bags from Tokyo and Paris, I placed myself in another queue. The number of people was growing steadily. It was very cold, as the queue was standing right next to the entrance and I was wearing light shoes, because there had been NO SNOW WHATSOEVER in Tokyo, the temperatures were above freezing, and nobody could foresee a stop in Paris. When queuing, I was observing the reactions of fellow passengers in the same distress; some stood quietly, others were annoyed at the weather, the travel, or the airport staff (and rightly so!). Still others were doing their best to outsmart the rest and jump the queue even by a couple of persons. The queue was perhaps one or two hundred people long, but the service was so slack (including a break for *dejeuner*) that it took ages. I reached the counter after ... three hours. Within those three hours I had internally rebelled a couple of times against queuing – I hate queues and have never queued for anything, even for the most fashionable Hoff collections for young ladies – I preferred wearing my old pair of jeans than wasting my time in queues and changing rooms. At the counter, a very friendly Air France employee informed me that although the plane to Warsaw operated by another line had not yet taken off, she was not able to put me on the passenger list. I thought I would burst into tears right there and then... I was supposed to bake the first gingerbread that night with my daughters and prepare everything for the pâté. The next day we were to bake more cakes, pack the food and go to Oliwa to my Parents – and suddenly all my planning started to collapse...

‘So what do I do now?’ - I asked naively, and the lady answered ‘Please try the other queue at another airport level’ ... But I had seen the other queue hours before – thousands of people in it. Hopeless!!! I could not even locate a beginning or end of that other queue. I decided I stood no chance to book anything. But what should I do next...?

A sudden idea – there must be a hotel at the airport; I even recalled it was a Sheraton. Animated by hope, I collected my luggage, coat and shawl (at that point I was already carrying it, as it got very hot) and went towards the Sheraton, trying to find the justification for possibly spending a fortune there. Trying to balance on the escalator with both arms and hands laden with luggage was a mere trifle. Finding my way through the crowds camping out at the airport and the railway station, I finally reached the hotel. And there I saw ... a queue to the restaurant. I joined it briefly, but a certain sense of pride soon made me abandon the hope of French soup and other dishes – I ended up with a sandwich and coffee from a bakery. The lady at the hotel reception did not even pretend to be friendly. She told me they were booked up and gave me an A4 sheet with addresses and telephone numbers of nearby hotels, suggesting I should phone them and find out myself. A hotel boy even showed me the way to the phone booth, but I did not have any French telephone card on me, and coins were useless. I left the hotel furious. I was still capable of feeling that emotion – in an hour I would totally surrender.

All I wanted to do is sit down and cry of helplessness. I was walking around aimlessly, not finding the way to cope with the situation. The snow had melted but the airport remained paralyzed. My mobile ran out of power, there was no computer access; I had no idea what to do. All I knew was that I would not join any other queue and that I wanted to reach Warsaw before Christmas Eve, I had made all that way to be home for Christmas. The following day Marysia, my cello-playing daughter, was to perform at the Warsaw Philharmonic Hall. I promised her I would attend. In my mind’s eye I could see her disappointed, saying: ‘And you were not there, again...’. So I collected my things again and walked towards the terminal, quite aimlessly. I took the escalator again, I found out that the crowd was even greater than before and that apart from passengers, a large group of homeless people, obviously seeking refuge from snow, tried to find some shelter at the airport. I could not even dream about a place to sit down. The entrances to bars were blocked, the only restaurant positively barricaded from inside. I thought I would sit down on the floor and make no further effort. All I wanted was to fall asleep. I had had a full day at the Tokyo airport, a night flight to Paris and more

than twelve hours at the Paris airport. But a sensible idea occurred to me: 'I will phone home, perhaps they will at least cheer me up'... But first I had to locate a kiosk selling phone cards. I marched again with all my belongings to the other side of the airport. I felt a strong urge to abandon that entire luggage, so heavy in my tired hands, and run out. But I reached the kiosk and, buying a phone card, I treated myself to my favourite chocolate with nougat filling.

At last I made a phone call. Of course my family was informed about the possibility of my delay (I had been prudent enough to warn them by e-mail from Tokyo, using a public computer). Together we decided that the situation was hopeless, that the snow turned out to be more nuisance than joy, that the French could not cope with Christmas traffic and that perhaps I should stop travelling that much. At first we could not think of any friends or acquaintances whom we could call for help and ask to put me up for the night. At last, my husband's great idea, a quick action of our Warsaw friends and after an hour I found myself at the hospitable and cosy home of Jadwiga who, having treated me to some lovely hot soup and a glass of Żubrówka, helped me book my flight and released me from any social obligations, sending me straight to bed. I woke up after fifteen hours. It was snowing... The vision of spending Christmas abroad was becoming more and more real. Fortunately, the following day the air traffic in Paris was back to normal. I took the evening flight, several hours late, but at last I arrived at Warsaw. My family were waiting for me, all three, and we had full nine days to spend together.

The home was filled with a sweet smell of gingerbread. Ewa showed me boxes of Christmas cookies: nuts on wafer, without any flour; we have been keeping that tradition in our family for twenty-five years. The pâté was well baked and well-seasoned. My share of the preparations included the beetroot soup, herrings in olive oil, cranberry jelly dessert and poppyseed with dried fruit and nuts. After two days, a Christmas tree appeared, reaching the ceiling and filling the air with its beautiful fragrance. This time my girls decorated it. After the Christmas Eve supper, when we entered our 'Christmas Tree Room', we dived under the Christmas tree for gifts. Alas, the Santa who bought presents in Tokyo and Paris did not manage to write the usual funny rhymes for the labels this time. However, a younger generation of Santas kept up that tradition.

That Christmas time seemed very short to me. Right after the New Year I am due back in Tokyo. My friend has promised me a visit to a Shinto shrine, where many Japanese people (including the Imperial Family) go to celebrate the New Year. This will be yet another occasion to get to know Japanese customs. It takes a several-month stay to really get to know the country and its inhabitants. One is able to learn things much more important than the quick, superficial knowledge one gains when just 'sight-seeing'. I have several weeks in Tokyo still ahead of me. They will be filled with work with my students and my own regular practice. When I return back to Poland it will be springtime, and I will give a series of concert performances. I am already looking forward to it very much.

And in the meantime – 'Sayonara parties', i.e. farewell parties for all my collaborators and friends, organized by them at my Tokyo home. A class concert organized together with my students. I hope to be back one day.