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JAPANESE DIARIES (1)

FLIGHT FROM HELSINKI TO TOKYO, 6-7 OCTOBER

The stewardess of certain Scandinavian airlines was so kind and attentive that she persuaded me to have my breakfast at one a.m., despite the fact that I wasn't hungry. Flying in business class always makes one well-disposed. Apart from the „welcome on board” champagne, the selection of wines to go with your meal, there is also a question of a subtle difference between plastic and faience crockery, to the advantage of the latter. During the flight I always catch up on the movies I did not have time to watch. And, as always, turning away from another screen plot, I feasted my eyes on the sunset and sunrise high above the clouds. I could not get enough looking at those intense purples and mauves that I remember from my first flight to Tokyo. A quarter of a century ago.

SUNDAY, 10 OCTOBER

I have been travelling to Japan for 25 years. I have been here a dozen or so times, I cannot even say exactly how many. At a certain point I even started worrying that this would be my thirteenth time, so I decided to disregard the figures. Yet, despite having been here so many times, never before have I taken a Sunday stroll in the park. The notion of a day off work did not exist at all! There was always something to be done: if not a concert, than a rehearsal, own practice, travel, lessons or interviews. So I have set my foot in a Japanese park just once before, and even that was in a hurry, as I was supposed to catch my flight on that day. It was at the beginning of the year, in January, in Kanazawa — one of the oldest cities of Japan. I did not give a concert there but I was conducting master classes and my agent, for whom Kanazawa was a home town, wanted to show me round this very beautiful and unique place. The gardens of Kanazawa were extraordinary: very carefully tended, with lots of plants that were unknown to me. Despite wintertime, flower buds were beginning to show on some of the branches. As could be expected, the park was full of tourists and everybody was taking photos in places especially indicated for that purpose – on the bridge, close to the bridge, behind the bridge, in a group, solo, against a tree, a lamp-post, a background of trees – and so did we. My best photo is taken under the bridge and shows four men walking one after another and sweeping the river. Yes, that was exactly what they were doing! As we were approaching the bridge, we saw several masculine figures, with their heads in hats visible from under the bridge, performing strange movements. Then slowly, the shoulders emerged, the jackets, high rubber boots and brooms. The gentlemen were sweeping the river-bed so vigorously as if they were intending to turn the tide. The view was so extraordinary that we could not stop laughing for quite a long time.

And today – a visit to the Tokyo park called ‘The WAKA Poetry Garden - Rikugien Park’, hidden behind a wall right in the middle of a busy quarter. The entrance fee is three dollars. Not far from the entrance gate there is a charming pond with some islands, many walking paths, bridges and small tea-houses. In the pond and the river there are carp swimming, some of them coloured, white-grey-brown, some orange as huge goldfish. They behaved like trained dolphins. People were feeding them bread and the carp were fighting for it quite aggressively. Whole families of turtles were also there, so beautiful! And they were swimming quite speedily. They were tilting their cute little heads and moving what must have been their paws (not fins, surely). I was admiring their shells, looking like carved shields or even graphic objects – symmetrical patterns, light against a dark background.

I adore Bonsai trees – always different in their shapes from other trees. Regretfully, I do not know the names of all those plants growing in Japan. I do recognize palm-trees and bamboos, but that's about it. A mass of mushrooms was growing on something that resembled a lawn, and their smell reminded me of Polish forests in autumn. Do mushrooms smell the same everywhere? The earth surely smells differently. Today in Tokyo, on an October afternoon, the earth was fragrant with ripe humidity, giving away the heat that it had accumulated during summertime which, people say, was very hot this year. And the park strollers, the usual lot - touring groups, parents with small children, old age pensioners - all of them smiling, enjoying the colours of approaching autumn.

14 OCTOBER

What I love doing in Japan is watching commuters who missed their train. They are sprinting down the stairs still hoping to catch it; they can hear the bell that signals closing the doors, but they keep running anyway, speeding up, only to find the door banging right in front of their noses. The carriages remain still for a few more seconds, then slowly start rolling, and the Japanese faces express frustration and anger. The Japanese, always so restrained and so polite, can get angry too! Sometimes somebody pretends that they do not care. I have never ever heard anybody swearing (perhaps they do it silently). Watching such a person I am far from *Schadenfreude*; this is pure observation. Those faces used to seem to me indistinguishable before – Japanese, oriental. Now, after all those years, I can perceive they are different and, as always, as everywhere – the human soul is in the eyes. Japanese girls are a special case here, those dyed blonds with false lashes on ridiculously high heels, in mini-shorts, each with a foxtail attached to her attire (apparently in fashion now). Hundreds of trinkets dangling from their mobiles, little bells, kittens - and complete blankness, not even ‘nothingness’, in their eyes.

SUNDAY, 13 OCTOBER

Quite unexpectedly, I have a free weekend again. I have decided to take a look around my neighbourhood. My assistant tells me there is a market-place near the Sugamo railway station, in the vicinity of where I live. Never before have I visited any market-place in Japan. I did some shopping in the department store, but a real bazaar... ?

I found myself in a long street with shop upon a shop and lots of ‘bazaar-type’ merchandise. A bit of everything, a true hodgepodge – in Poland, we call it ‘soap and plum jam’. A stand with all things marine: dried fish, shells, grass and seaweed; next to it, a tea shop, with a display of tiny bowls with samples of green tea (now, at last, I am able to tell differences in taste). Right next to the tea-house there is a drugstore with its employee screaming out invitations to potential customers in the street – quite a scary sort of advertisement, in fact. Every now and then there is a box with an inscription „Everything for 100 Yen”, full of treasures: kitchenware and garden utensils. stationery (my eyes resting on piles upon piles of paper sheets, envelopes, stickers... I was brave, I resisted the temptation, though there were also some lovely bowls, absolutely impractical, to be bought). A couple of meters away, a sweet shop offering chestnuts in sugar, rice cookies in tens of varieties, jellies. I love rice cookies, they are crunchy like nuts, slightly salty, some of them fried, some topped with a thin savoury layer of crust, something like vinaigrette or vinegar; and it was at that point that I lost my will power and yielded in, only promising myself it would be one packet per week. There were also some shops with ‘Japanese art’ – a kind of local crafts shops selling products made of the famous Japanese paper and lacquer – little dollies, scarves, napkins (I speak about them in diminutives, as they are usually small in size). Sometimes one can come across ‘designers’ clothes made of silk or cotton – interesting, but usually small sizes. In front of one of such shops stood a tall Japanese woman, whose task was - like that of the boy from the drugstore nearby - to invite potential customers in. Her voice was already very coarse from too much shouting, but she kept repeating her advertising message like a mantra, believing in its effectiveness, with her gaze fixed somewhere in space, looking as if she were positively going to levitate ... And suddenly, when someone was leaving the shop with the purchase, the usherette stopped her incantations and acknowledged the customer with very sensible „Thank you!”. That word, or I should rather say expression – ‘arigato’ – has got many varieties in Japanese, and may be one-word or several word long, depending on the context in which it is used, the occasion, and the addressee. I am still trying to figure it out and say the right words to the right person on the right occasion.

Shops with clothes and shoes were not particularly interesting – everything made of man-made fibres, not a trace of silk, so I did not even bother to enter. But I am always intrigued by places emitting interesting smells. Usually those are areas around temples or shops with devotional items – one can buy there perfumed candles, incense sticks, etc. So it turned out that there was a temple in the vicinity, with a lot of people gathering round it on that Sunday afternoon. I tried to enquire about that place by asking people in English, but nobody was able to help me. It was only on the following day that I learned from my assistant that the Buddhist temple in Togenuki-Jizo was called Koganji. I was told many people went on pilgrimages (is it the right expression?) to get there, believing in supernatural

healings, among other things. And indeed, I noticed many doctor's tables in front of the temple with patients gathering round them, and on the tables a multitude of jars, powders, ointments and other mysterious objects. Two monks in oriental-looking hats and traditional robes were standing at the entrance, making blessing gestures towards the approaching people: young and old, women and men, sometimes children. The faithful were coming up to a huge container, a stone jar, from which strange vapours were rising; they would immerse their hands in those vapours and smear the volatile substance all over their bodies. It was fascinating, yet I felt very strange witnessing it. As I did not want to be a nosy on-looker, I entered the temple and saw something like an altarpiece, with lots of candles, paintings, dragons and flowers. There was the Buddha statue and around it were the monks, different than those I had seen before, differently clad, quietly moving around. A large box was placed at the entrance, and visitors were dropping coins into it, making much noise. The place is permeated with the atmosphere of contemplation, but does not resemble our churches. A totally different, intriguing culture. So when I retire, I plan to learn some more foreign languages, go to Mexico and acquire computer skills, and I will also study the cultures and religions of the Far East.

FRIDAY, 22 OCTOBER

I have been working quite hard for the last couple of days. Piano practice in the morning, getting ready for my classes, and teaching at the Geidai University in the afternoons. So today I am rewarding myself with a trip to the centre of Tokyo. First, an hour or so spent on the double-decker bus on a customary sightseeing tour, as is now fashionable in tourist centres of the world. Obviously, our guide spoke Japanese but as she was also singing, I found it interesting and funny. They sing here in such small, trembling voices and it is really hard to guess what they are singing about. One hour proved much too short for such a gigantic city as Tokyo, but we managed to drive past the Imperial Palace gardens, we saw the famous Tokyo-Tower, the new Fuji TV building, the Rainbow Bridge. We were passing many awfully ugly sky-scrapers: concrete, steel and glass structures, high-rise – impressive, but so cold and non-symmetrical! One's eyes rest when one sees a small building resembling a European house, however shabby it might be. But temples – that is quite a different story! And tonight I am dining at a traditional Japanese fish restaurant – I will write about it tomorrow.