

Ewa Pobłocka

JAPANESE DIARIES (2)

SUNDAY, 31 OCTOBER

Today I plucked up my courage and drove to the airport by myself for the first time to collect Małgosia, who was flying from Australia. She is planning to spend several days here with me. We are going to be tourists and take a look at the fascinating world of temples and Buddhas. It turned out that travelling to the Narita airport situated about 200 km (!) from the centre of Tokyo was simple. The entire way from home to the airport took less than two hours. At the airport all the information was displayed in Japanese and in English.

MONDAY, 1 NOVEMBER

A regular working day at the university, no-one is celebrating anything... and I miss the smell of a thousand lit candles... So I lit a symbolic candle too and installed it among chrysanthemums that I bought on my way home. My daughters contacted me via Skype from Warsaw asking for instructions for baking yeast rolls with icing that we always used to enjoy in Oliwa and also for some know-how concerning the bean soup (a traditional dish at our Warsaw home). In Tokyo, the weird atmosphere of Halloween had been already in the air for some time, but manifested itself only in fancy dresses worn by some restaurant staff. The more scary the outfits, the happier the children.

TUESDAY, 2 NOVEMBER

And today I have seen the first Christmas items... paper bags with Christmas trees and sleighs. I think in a week or two we will be having fake snow, and this will set the Christmas gift-buying frenzy in full motion...

WEDNESDAY, 3 NOVEMBER

A day off work. Culture Day — this was the entire explanation from my assistant at the University. So we are planning to take a trip. I have always been dreaming of finding myself somewhere close to Mount Fuji. I have seen it many times from windows of trains and I had the occasion to watch it for several days from one of the Tokyo hotels where I was accommodated on the 34th floor — when the weather was clear, Fuji was literally filling all the view.

Once, when I was on the train in Japan and Mount Fuji came into sight, many of my Japanese fellow-travellers hushed their voices and the atmosphere became solemn. Fuji! I decided to get somewhere close to it. My choice was Odawara, from where one could buy a ticket for a trip to Hakone area. The tourist office staff informed us that we would need at least two days to see every attraction offered by the guidebook. Still, as it turned out, even six hours were enough to make the trip to that volcanic landscape shaped thousands of years ago worthwhile. So first we embarked on a crowded electric train. We were standing, as the train was full of Japanese, and also some American, German and Swiss tourists. We were going uphill, slower and slower. At some stations, the train changed directions at switchbacks, just like in Zakopane. Through the windows we could admire fabulous views: forests taking on the hues of autumn, botanical gardens, an open air sculpture museum, a begonia garden, steaming hot springs. Almost everybody was heading in the same direction as we were - to Hakone-Yumoto, in order to change for the mountain train, also crowded, and go further up. On that train we were asked by a very friendly Japanese guy about the language we were speaking in. He thought it was Russian or German. When we told him it was Polish, he offered us his seat and exclaimed with delight: 'Polando — Chopin! I love Chopin'. We were very pleased... (A

similar thing happened to me once in a shop with ‘designer’ clothes. The salesman asked about the language and immediately exclaimed: Chopin! I love Chopin! When I told him he could buy a CD in Japan with me playing Chopin, I got a big discount – which makes the scarf that I bought there even more precious to me.) At last the train reached the terminal station. Just one look at the valley — steaming hot springs, sulphur smell in the air— and we transferred again, this time to a cable car. In that one we had separate seats and we were travelling uphill again. Everybody was taking photos but me — and I, empty-handed, tried to save in my memory the images unrolling before my eyes. But Fuji was not visible. No travel agent could guarantee clear sky... Still, the atmosphere was pleasant, and it felt good to be outside Tokyo for the whole day.

At last we reached our destination. We saw Lake Ashi and the Sightseeing Cruise ship was ready to welcome us on board. At first we were hiding under the deck, but suddenly I felt the ‘call of the wild’ and we went on the deck. The views were fantastic, but it was cold, so we had to wrap ourselves up warmly. Fortunately, I had my favourite grey sweater with me. A scarf to protect my head and we were sailing on. Tourists were going crazy with their cameras. And suddenly – the clouds dispersed. First we saw the very top of Mount Fuji, covered with snow, then the entire slope. Mission accomplished! Just what is it that makes this view so fascinating? Even I decided to take some photos with Mount Fuji in the background. The trip was over. We came back to Odawara by bus and then by train to Tokyo. A wonderful day!

FRIDAY, 5 NOVEMBER

Early morning train, then a taxi to the Tsukiji fish market close to the centre of Tokyo. And there – treasures galore! Unfortunately, I did not know how to sign up for the early morning fish auction, but no matter; I had never seen such amounts of fish and seafood of all types anyway. They say there are nearly five hundred various products to be bought and over 1500 restaurant owners come here every morning to do their shopping. Hundreds, if not thousands of stands with seaweed, dried fish, smoked fish, raw fish, fish meal, fish eggs, crab, octopus and shrimps... There were small water containers on some of the stalls, ice on most of the others and ... all that noise. Young men shouted at the top of their voices praising their goods, persuading you to buy, to try. Their voices blended with the noise of the city and the music from loudspeakers of several temples where their ‘altarpieces’ resemble our harvest festival decorations. Right next to the stalls there are tiny restaurants where people queue to taste the newly-made sushi, fresh from the ship. Unfortunately, pre-planned activities prevented me to spend more time there. I grabbed a large box of king prawns and returned home. And in the evening we are going out to have suki-yaki.

The restaurant, situated on the 15th floor of the building, is friendly, divided into small dining rooms, each served by a different waitress. Kimono-clad, she is greeting you with her most charming smile and you are ready to believe that she has been waiting just for you this evening. I order sake, chilled and warmed, and we are waiting.... What appears first is a small appetizer, the raw fish sashimi, soon followed by a huge stone plate with finely sliced beef. The waitress takes each slice and immerses it in soy sauce, previously prepared in our presence, then transfers it to fish bouillon boiling with various vegetables and several kinds of tofu. At the same time we are served miso soup and rice— both dishes in bowls with lids. One is supposed to eat such a dish slowly, making a conversation, drinking sake and admiring the skill with which the waitress is preparing the food in front of our eyes, using sticks of course! After that a small dessert arrives— each of us is served a small stone board with three lovely little bowls containing three different treats: fruit jelly, a specially prepared chestnut and a scoop of sweet potato ice-cream! We were having our dessert somewhat in tension, as a slight earthquake could be sensed. However, we were told that the building we

were in was particularly stable... And after such a feast we were already making plans involving a tuna steak...