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JAPANESE DIARIES (3)

CHINA, 25-29 NOVEMBER

When I visited China for the first time, this past May, it took me less than twenty minutes to decide - never again! Despite the fact that exotic China had always been my dream destination. Yet, once more I have confirmed my conviction that one's impressions from a given place depend on the people one meets there. So I am not going to say a word about my unfriendly interpreter from the previous visit – I prefer to recall the recent visit, which was truly enjoyable!

However, before I could set my foot on the Chinese soil again, I had to pass a test in self-sufficiency in Tokyo. I decided to go to the airport with my entire luggage completely unaided, on my own. To leave my Tokyo flat in good order I had to switch off the heating system, empty the rubbish bin, close windows... so I left later than planned. To make matters worse, no taxi in sight – and when I finally got one, it took the driver twice as much time as usual to deliver me to the station. I rushed to catch the Keisei line train to the airport. The service on that line was fantastic, as usual. The ticket collector was bowing to every passenger who was getting on or off the train... I kept checking my airline e-ticket in order to get my flight time and terminal number right.

So I got off the train, full of self-confidence, and headed towards the Departures, passing several security points. I reached the third floor and ... began to suspect that something was wrong... my lines (Delta) were nowhere to be found! I approached a smiling hostess and was told that my plane to Beijing was about to depart from another terminal. So I ran to the bus to get it. It was late. Having checked in my luggage I went to passport control again, where my Chinese and Japanese visas were carefully studied (this time I had a multiple entry visa, with the magical 'professor' status). At last I got to the gate — Beijing-Delta flight no. 059. I made it! The flight was quite short, less than three hours, but as we were flying over the missile-launching Korea, I felt more uneasy than usual.

At the airport in Beijing I found out to my delight that my mobile (dead in Japan) was back in range. I immediately became addicted again, despite the fact that I had been happily doing without any mobile phone for two months in Tokyo. At Arrivals I was greeted by a friendly young Chinese woman and a driver – they were to take me to my hotel. It was quite late already (in China they add one hour). My interpreter turned out to be a charming and resolute girl and she had such quick, springy movements that in my thoughts I immediately dubbed her my 'Bubbly Girl'. On our way from the airport I managed to strike up a conversation. I recalled travelling with my parents many, many years before, particularly in the former USSR where we used to go on concert tours – my Mum as a singer, myself as piano accompaniment and my Dad to keep us company. He was also the one to keep the conversation going, while Mum and I were always silently 'focused on art'. I remembered when, whether in Almaty or Mogilev, Dad always used to ask the same question in his charming Russian: 'And how many people live in your town?' ... So I asked the question too and received an answer: 20 million! It is half of Poland – I thought.

The hotel turned out to be really good. For breakfast, served from early morning, one could have duck, Chinese steamed dumplings with various stuffings, and fresh fruit. In the garden there was a typical Chinese pavilion with a characteristic upturned roof. Under that roof each morning a group of tourists were performing a series of physical exercises under the supervision of a Chinese instructor. I knew that workout (known as the 'Sun Salutation') very well from various books, that is to say, from theory. In practice I went through the entire routine once or twice in my life... but at least I knew what that was all about. But I could not join that group. Having consulted the Polish embassy, I planned out my day. First I decided to have a look at the town itself. After all, while in Beijing, one cannot spend the entire time at the piano! However, to have my conscience clear, I devoted two hours to studying Chopin scores of the works I was to perform the following evening at the Forbidden City Concert Hall. And after that – a meeting with Pan Mariusz, a trainee at the Polish embassy in Beijing, a fluent speaker of Chinese and a sinology graduate of the Poznań University. Mariusz arrived

punctually at the lobby of my hotel. It soon turned out that Mariusz could not only speak but also write Chinese and was an enthusiast of Chinese culture. A young man of wide interests, he willingly shared his knowledge. So we soon agreed on the plans for the next couple of hours. First, a visit to a Lama temple. It was Buddhist, as Japanese temples are, but was differently decorated, with more colours. As all such temples, it actually consisted of several buildings, a different Buddha in each of them. There was even a feminine – or androgynous – Buddha figure, Guanyin. The walls were decorated with marvellous paintings; there were flowers and fruit on the altars. People were burning incense, bowing, a mantra was sung (spoken?) by a monk. From there we walked to the Temple of Confucius situated among lovely cypress trees and saw the ancient ‘Scholar-Tree’. Unfortunately, we had no time for the Imperial Academy, but it was in the Temple that I learned about the pragmatism of the Chinese: when in public service, they follow the philosophy of Confucius; once they retire and go back to their villages, they turn to Taoism, and right before they die – to Buddhism, as Buddha promises change, rebirth, reincarnation.

Being in Beijing, one can sense the Chinese love of symmetry (oh, how that pleased me!). This is visible in the architecture of that city — the Temple of Heaven in the southern part of Beijing, the Temple of Earth in the northern part, the Temple of the Moon in the west and the Temple of the Sun in the east (I was able to visit one of them later, after my concert). Alas, I only just had a glimpse of the city and I needed to go back to the piano to practice, so after a quick but tasty lunch in a vegetarian restaurant close to Confucius (Sichuan cuisine, quite hot) we took a taxi and went back to our very hospitable embassy. On our way we were passing the Russian district – which I found surprising. Russian inscriptions on shops made me smile: *‘torgoviy centr’* ... *‘riemien magazin’* (a shop with leather belts)...

In the residence of the Polish Ambassador Mr Tadeusz Chomicki I was offered access to a Calisia grand piano, at which I spent several hours in a beautifully arranged interior. During the break in my piano practice session I had the chance to talk briefly with my hosts. This year, the Chopin’ Year, I visited several Polish embassies, in Washington, Dublin and Beijing, and I cherish the best memories of those visits. I have not been to the Tokyo embassy, but it was them who organized, together with the National Fryderyk Chopin Institute, a wonderful event for the ‘Chopin family’, about which I intend to write after my return from Beijing to Tokyo.

My first Beijing day ended with ... shopping! The famous „Silk Street”. I had not made any inquiries beforehand concerning the range of goods available there, to stay level-headed. Resolutely, I walked in (with Mariusz, who demonstrated the patience of a saint!) and went straight to the first floor where the kingdom of pearls opened in front of me: pearls of various colours, sizes, and value, all of them beautiful and seductive, so seductive that I confess that I sinned... and it was well worth the price. When I was leaving the shop, I came across a small tea stall: they had black, green and red teas, first flush, teas aged for several months, or even fifteen years. Wide-leaf and other varieties I do not know... And so I sinned again. Anyway, I think it was quite reasonable of me to have spent only an hour and a half at that ‘sanctuary’. After all, the next day I was supposed to give a concert in Beijing!

On Saturday, the 27th of November, I was to appear at the embassy before noon. With my heart in my mouth I took a cab and showed a piece of paper with the address to the driver. And what if he can’t find his way? – I feared. What if he makes me get out of his taxi right in the middle of the city that is totally unknown to me? The driver did get lost several times, drawing up to several other embassies, but finally we got there. My piano practice was not long – I remembered I would have another rehearsal with the concert piano right before the concert. As usual before the public performance – a good lunch, a short nap, packing my stage dress and we set out towards the Forbidden City. The sun was setting and when we arrived at one of the gates, we saw a beautifully sun-lit garden. As the previous concert was still in progress, I asked my „Bubbly Girl” if we could go for a walk. I wanted to find myself in the famous Tiananmen Square. And soon I did – just in time to witness the flag-lowering ceremony with crowds of people, the military and solemn atmosphere. Right opposite the main entrance gate to the palace I saw the Mao Mausoleum. In that vast square I suddenly felt lost and *‘si petite’*... I wanted to go away as soon as possible, I was almost running in the direction of my grand piano awaiting me. And suddenly my phone rang, from Poland. From a place several thousand kilometres away...

The concert hall had good acoustics; the Steinway piano was well prepared. The auditorium could accommodate 1400 listeners. I was performing a very long Chopin programme, following the organizers' requirements. Apart from complete ballades, several nocturnes, a group of waltzes and two scherzos, there were also two polonaises, one at the beginning and one at the end of my performance. I was playing with such patriotic zeal that I do not even recall feeling it 30 years ago at the Competition. The mazurkas came as an encore. I was positively surprised by the reception of the music by the audience. I still remembered the Shanghai concert when I could hear talks, answered mobile calls and the rustle of candy wrappings. Here in Beijing it was only at the beginning of the second part, right after the intermission, when I thought that no concert could do without some popcorn being eaten, as if we were at the pictures!

After the concert I had a very pleasant meeting with the audience in my dressing room and after that the Embassy Counsellor took me to the newly opened National Grand Theatre. The Chinese call it a 'pearl' or 'egg', and it emerges from water. It looked splendid after sunset, fabulously illuminated. A performance had just ended at one of the stages (there are five of them, for 5000 spectators, and chamber concerts are also held in the library), the audience were leaving but we managed to get in for a few minutes. The design is French, the workmanship Chinese, the materials used are glass, wood and chromed steel. Beautiful. Despite lots of glass and metal elements, the building is not cold-looking. There is plenty of greenery and light. It is in that very building that Szymanowski's *King Roger* is to be staged soon.

We came back to the hotel for a while to leave the flowers and the dress and soon the tireless Mariusz was taking me to see Beijing by night. We went to the famous Shichahai district - full of clubs, pubs, craft shops and food places. Noisy, but with a climate of its own. Small, narrow streets, no heavy traffic (mostly rickshaws) and in the middle of the district there are two towers, the Bell Tower and the Drum Tower, from which a bugle call was once alternately played. A different world. The moon was shining, people were enjoying themselves. I was in a good mood too, but it was getting late and cold and we had to go back to the hotel to have a good rest before tomorrow's early start.

SUNDAY, 28 NOVEMBER

We left the hotel at ten o'clock sharp. As the weather was fine, we did not have to hurry. My guide had a sightseeing programme already planned. First we went to Jingshan Park to admire the best view of the Forbidden City from the Prospect Hill. However, before we actually climbed the somewhat steep slope to the viewing platform, I noticed several pictures of everyday life, seemingly typical for China. Sunday - a day off work, and so we saw a group of women dancing with sashes (it looks like rhythmic gymnastics without music performed for the passers-by). These women were dancing to satisfy the need of the soul, but also of the body. Several meters away a couple of amateur choirs were singing local songs to the accompaniment of flutes, accordion and a snake skin drum, guided by quite a good conductor who was singing along with them. They were singing with joy, from their hearts. They say this is how the human need of belonging to a community also manifests itself...

We went several steps uphill and came across a 'soloist' who was standing on the protruding rock. He was singing in a beautiful voice, paying no attention to us, performing with total abandon and with operatic gestures. I was listening to him for quite a while, because he seemed to be singing his soul out. Fascinating... There was also a mini-orchestra of musicians playing the *hulusi* (a type of flute). And finally I saw a scene that touched me most of all: a small, low table on a patch of grass, rolls of paper, containers with ink, several pens (or rather brushes) and an elderly man writing Chinese symbols ... for the love of calligraphy. Reportedly, there are people here who begin each day with writing, even if it's five a.m. The activity is said to calm one down and aid concentration. A kind of meditation? What do they write? I've heard they write fragments of ancient poetry, from memory! In the Chinese way of thinking all the arts are interlinked: calligraphy mingles with poetry and painting, less so with music, as music is considered a folk art.

As we were moving on, we saw a makeshift stage and a single amateur actor in a monodrama. He was telling stories, apparently hilarious, because people slowed down, listened and laughed aloud. A

clown, dressed up, performing on a Sunday morning in the park, for his own pleasure and for other people. All around the park people were playing a kind of ball game that we call 'zośka' in Poland – I remember it from high school – in which players toss the small ball or bag (filled with sand or beans) trying not to let it fall on the ground. Everybody's playing! More sophisticated versions of this game are also encountered, such as 'zośka' played at night with a ball that glows in the dark. People here truly know how to enjoy themselves! Having seen all this on our way we finally reached the top, from which we admired the view of the old imperial palace. It is said to have 999 rooms, as nine is believed to be a lucky number; with a view to the gardens and Beijing, and more precisely the Beijing smog. The city is reportedly very polluted and therefore dangerous to live in.

Yet, the most amazing views were still ahead. The taxi took us to the Temple of Heaven. The name itself was already beautiful and intriguing, and when I saw the temple itself my first association was with Kornel Makuszyński and his children's book character Matolek the Billy-Goat; in one of his adventures Matolek landed in China and saw 'a palace like a teapot'! And that was precisely what I saw, too: the blue-and-white, teapot-shaped structure. Behind it there was the Echo Wall (reminding me of the Whispering Caves in our Oliwa Park) and passages through many richly decorated gates. The main building, a round pagoda called the 'pavilion of harmony and time', featured blue, gold, green and red. The weather was lovely and sunny, and the 'Italian blue' sky added even more colour to the scene. I was admiring all that beauty still pinching myself in disbelief and repeating to myself: I am in Beijing.

As lunchtime was approaching, we chose a small cafe for a quick meal of Chinese dumplings and coffee – we did not want to spend too much time eating. When we were leaving, I heard music that was definitely not Chinese. Behind the building, under the trees, a man was playing the guitar and another one was singing ... 'The Moscow Nights' in Chinese. I swear! Leaving the grounds of the Temple of Heaven I still could not believe my ears. In a moment we were due to leave the town and drive in the direction of the mountains...

After almost two-hour drive (I managed to catch some sleep in the meantime) we arrived at a car park close to the chairlift to the ... Chinese Great Wall. Sunset was approaching and everything was bathed in beautiful light. Our journey to the top of the Wall took 10 minutes. The scenery was becoming more and more beautiful, fantastic and wild, quite different from our Polish mountain views back home. Still, the situation brought to my memory the day when, as a nine-year-old girl, I was on a chairlift to the Śnieżka summit and when I defined my life philosophy in the following words: 'I would like to sit on that chair but at the same time I would like this chair to be empty' – quite a different thing from 'to have one's cake and eat it'. As it was late, there were few tourists on the Wall and local vendors selling cold drinks (in a manner similar to our farm women with blueberries and sour cream) were leaving their stalls and walking back to their villages. Up there, on the Wall, one is supposed to climb up and down the stairs a lot, and unfortunately I was not fit for long walking. We came up to several watchtowers and admired the view. The Wall was meandering up and down across the hills. Built for centuries, by a countless number of people, and – from what I know – in vain, as it was built too late. But the structure has survived as a historical monument and I had to pinch myself again to really believe it. I was there, on the Great Wall!

Such a day could only end with Peking duck, red wine and some delicious vegetables: aubergine and lotus root with chilli and olive oil. Magnificent! I came back to the hotel to pack my suitcase, but every now and then I interrupted packing and hastily made notes about my impressions from China. As always before the flight I slept restlessly; at 4:30 a.m. I was at the airport. After my arrival at Tokyo I took a taxi and went straight to the University, where my students were waiting for me. I was teaching until the evening. That was a very long day.