

## 20: Homeward bound

I climb out of bed at 6 a.m. after yet another night of interrupted sleep – the Indian fellow has been snoring again. He and his young companion are now clattering about and talking. Their lack of consideration for others is quite shocking.

I sit down for breakfast shortly after seven o'clock. We are given a mixture of Japanese and European food. I am now glad of this, as it will ease me gently back to my Western diet. Afterwards I buy a couple of postcards and sit down to write greetings on them. One of them is for Marta, the girl I met in France in 1982.

I leave the building at 8.30 and travel by train to Tokyo station. The trains are travelling very slowly for some strange reason, and I begin to fear that I will arrive late at the airport. At Tokyo station I ask where I must go for the train to the airport; it is just as well that I have checked, for I would have waited at the wrong platform. I am told to go downstairs to the Narita line and wait at platform four.

The JNR rapid train arrives at 9.10 a.m., and I hop on board. I find myself sitting opposite two Japanese businessmen. Outside, high-rise buildings, apartment blocks and factories flash by. It is built up all the way out to Chiba; Tokyo just seems to be endless! Only afterwards do I see a little bit of countryside. By now one of the businessmen has left; the other one puts his feet up on my seat and invites me to follow suit. He turns out to be a very pleasant man, who speaks and understands English perfectly. He tells me that he lives in Kamakura and spends an hour every day travelling to and from his business in Tokyo. He works in a trust bank; his hours are nine to five every day, though he often has to work later in the evenings.

At last we reach Narita town by 10.30. It has been raining, but now it has stopped. Just outside the station I catch the JNR bus to the airport and use my pass for the last time. We have a brief security stop on the way. Although we have to take our luggage out and put it back in the bus, the officials only look at our passports.

Inside the huge modern airport, I look around the souvenir shops in search of presents. The selection is not great: most of the items on sale are too gimmicky or too expensive. At last I find some suitable presents. As I have decided to spend the last of my money, I buy a few dolls, two nice purses, and a couple of smaller and cheaper purses. Then, noticing a handsome and reasonably-priced blue tea set, including a tray, for ¥2,800 (about £11), I decide to buy it for my mother in recompense for the loss of my jumper. I end up with two large bags of presents. It is a pity that I had acted hastily yesterday evening and bought the teapot and cups, but no doubt some use will be found for them.

After I have made my purchases, I go to the departure area and check in. At first the girl cannot find my flight on the computer, but the problem is eventually solved. Knowing that I live in Ireland, she has assumed incorrectly that the destination of my Aeroflot flight is Dublin. When she selects London, my details are revealed.

I quickly pass through the customs and immigration controls, then join a queue for the security check. I ask the girl to be careful with my fragile hand luggage, and have my films inspected visually instead of letting them go through the X-ray machine.

On the plane I am delighted to discover that I am in a small compartment just behind the first class area, and in the first row, which means that I have plenty of leg room. We take off at one o'clock on the dot and are soon soaring over the main island of Honshu. By now I have started to write my diary from the day before yesterday, but stop to gaze at the astonishing view now visible below us. As the clouds have cleared, I am able to look down over wild, rugged mountains, the ones in the distance

lost in mist. Little wisps of cloud drift between some of the peaks. This is certainly an untamed area of Japan – there is not a road, house or any sign of civilization to be seen. This fantastic mountain range extends for miles in every direction. What really amazes me is the magnificent view of Mount Fuji’s snowy peak soaring above a bank of cloud. Finally the famous volcano has revealed itself to me – it will be a memory to treasure.

Gradually we travel northwards, following the range of mountains, then swing around, heading north-westward. As we do so, the mountains slide out of view, and now we fly towards the coast and then over the Japan Sea. We pass a small island, then soar over a bank of gleaming white cloud. What a spectacular farewell to such an extraordinary country!

I continue writing my diary until it is time for lunch. This is a tasty meal consisting of fish, salad and bread as a starter, and a main course of rice, chicken and more salad. I finish with delicious ice cream and coffee.

When I look out the window again, we are now over Siberia: a huge, endless landscape of gently rolling mountains and wide, winding rivers. I gaze at this extraordinary scenery until we fly over another bank of cloud, and then resume my writing.

When I next look out, we have moved farther north. This time the clouds part to reveal a frozen, silver-coloured waste. Here there seem to be no mountains, but hundreds of frozen rivers, all following fantastic snake-like courses over the flat landscape. There is not a sign of a road or any form of life – we might as well be flying over an uninhabited planet somewhere else in outer space. Never have I seen such an astonishing scene. I think to myself: how many millions of acres of unusable land must there be down there?

The farther north we travel, the lower the sun sinks. Soon it is no longer visible and we have to turn on the lights in the plane. We are now up in Arctic regions.

A Japanese man who is sitting one seat away from me and is applying himself to a very large bottle of whiskey or brandy, now strikes up a conversation with me. He is quite an interesting and unusual individual. He tells me that he had been made to study Zen Buddhism at the Eihei-ji temple at Fukui for six years, beginning at the age of thirteen. Like the monks that I had seen on the film when I was there, he had to endure the bitter winters in the monastery without any type of heating, and live on a spartan diet. He then left and studied electronics, worked in a factory, changed jobs a couple of times, and now works for a film company that he had founded, which represents Granada Television in Japan. This means that he now has to travel regularly. He explains that the company in which he had worked beforehand had gone bust – a most unusual thing in Japan.

Although what he tells me about himself is interesting – and unusually frank for a Japanese person – his inside information about Kyoto is quite revealing. He explains that a night of food, drink and entertainment by geisha girls in one of the long-established and exclusive tea houses can cost a small fortune; the man tells me that the bills are settled for individuals or companies by go-betweens. He then talks about the class structure that exists in Kyoto. Although the walls of the former Imperial City have long since crumbled, invisible walls still exist. Within them, in the ‘Imperial’ part of the city, live the upper classes, who still do not deign to speak to the rabble who live outside. As I have already discovered from reading books, there are exquisite houses and gardens, unseen by the casual visitor, hidden behind walls in humble back streets within this Imperial quarter. The man tells me that one of his friends has a unique garden containing an artificial hill and a miniature *bonsai* tree

that is over five hundred years old. How it has managed to survive the many fires in Kyoto, he does not know.

When I quiz him about the disturbing westernization evident in Japan, he explains that this is just a façade. The hamburger stalls, fast food joints and everything associated with them are for daytime use only, when time is at a premium. In the evening, he tells me, people return home and revert to their traditional customs by taking a bath, eating a leisurely (!) dinner and so forth. He informs me that young people are being taught to appreciate their culture anew and therefore are paying more attention to it. This may explain why I have seen so many schoolchildren being taken on visits to temples and shrines. I hope that the man is correct, though I somehow doubt it. Perhaps this type of thing is happening in his circle or social class, for not everyone here – especially in large cities like Tokyo – lives in a traditional house and sleeps on *tatami* mats. I sense that the young people are of a different breed altogether, and that most of them would hardly know what Kabuki or Nō theatre is.

After listening to my companion and chatting to him, I return to my diary and write for another spell. The icy waste still stretches below us. When we begin to turn south west, the sun appears once again. By now my Japanese companion has fallen asleep.

At about 8 p.m., Japanese time, we are served another meal, which is much the same as before, though with a slice of brown bread this time. As I have seen apples and oranges being brought into the first class compartment earlier, I ask a stewardess if any fresh fruit is available when she comes to take away my tray. Although she tells me that it is normally only served to first-class passengers, she returns a moment later with a nice big red apple wrapped in a serviette. I thank her with a wink and make short work of it. Afterwards I spruce myself up and stretch my legs.

I return to my diary and bring it right up to date just as we are descending towards Moscow at about 11 o'clock, Japanese time. In Moscow it is 5 o'clock – six hours earlier.

When we break through the clouds, it is dark and dreary; there is a definite hint of winter outside. Soon there is a bump and we are down. As we are stopping here for about an hour, we are allowed out of the plane and into the deserted airport, where we can stroll about the transit lounge. The airport building, with its rows of empty seats, has a really dead atmosphere. I look at the souvenirs in the Beriozka shop and walk around rather aimlessly. I meet my Japanese companion sitting in a seat, looking the worst for wear after all his booze. He explains that his passport and papers have been taken, and that he must now wait for an indefinite period until he can be told what to do next. As he is travelling to Milan, he too is in transit, though he is not due to travel there until tomorrow.

At last we are allowed back on to our plane; we transit passengers are allowed to go first, before the new passengers join us. This time we have a group of large, overfed VIP Russians in the first class compartment, and more Russians in the section where I am sitting. We take off at 6.50 p.m. local time, and not long afterwards dinner is served yet again! This time the food is more basic and more typically Russian. We are given caviar and brown bread as a starter, some type of meat with rice and peas, white bread, and a small cake for dessert. A small apple is also supplied. It quickly becomes evident that the standard of service during this part of the flight is much lower than the service in the previous one, which had been excellent.

The meal over, I sit back to rest, for it is now long past my bedtime. I find it hard to sleep because of the constant roar of the engines. As it is quite cool in the plane, I help myself to a blanket and wrap it around me. Eventually, by changing seats and tilting the new one back, I finally manage to doze off.

At last the journey comes to its end as we approach the fairy lights of London and hurtle down towards the runway. We are thanked in Russian and English (no Japanese now); we step out of the plane and are taken to the airport building in a bus.

In the airport we have our passports checked and wait until our luggage comes tumbling on to a conveyor belt; I have never seen luggage treated in such a rough manner. In such a modern, sophisticated airport, it is disgraceful. I also notice that the signposts here are rather confusing. I find my way down to the Underground station, where I pay £1 for a ticket to Park Royal. On the train I chat to a lady and a small boy who have been on the plane and have been staying in Japan for two weeks. I give the boy some Japanese coins that I no longer want.

At Acton City station I hang around for ages in the cold waiting for a connecting train. It is very obvious that I am no longer in Japan! Gone is the ever-present efficiency and Oriental politeness; I have now become aware of the rather aggressive manner of the people here and the relative scruffiness of their clothes.

At last I hop on to a train, alight at the familiar Park Royal station, and walk briskly to my cousin Anne's house in Sandall Road, Ealing. As there is nobody at home, I let myself in using a key kept in a certain hiding place. It is a strange sensation entering a Western home once again. When I have got some things ready for the following morning, I telephone home and speak to my mother for a few minutes and make arrangements to be collected from the boat at Dun Laoghaire. Although I have changed my watch to local time, I now put it back another hour as winter time will start tonight. As I have gained so many hours during my journey here, I feel quite mixed up; when I retire to bed at about eleven o'clock, my body is supposed to be waking up, as it is seven o'clock in the morning for me!

Sunday, 28th October, 1984

I wake at about five o'clock in the morning after a good, solid sleep and spend the rest of the time until 6.30 a.m. just resting and dozing. I then get up and begin pottering around. As I cannot get my electric razor to work from the socket in my room, I go downstairs. For some strange reason, it does not work there either. At this point, Anne appears and asks me what I want for breakfast. I tell her to go back to bed – for she and the family have been out late last night – but she insists on staying up and attending on me. I then go up to the bathroom, where I use my safety razor and, after I have washed, I return to the kitchen, where I eat breakfast and chat to Anne.

Thanking her for everything, I leave the house at 7.30 and walk to the Hanger Lane tube station, where I catch a train immediately. I change at Tottenham Court Road and arrive at Euston Station soon after eight o'clock. I make enquiries about the B+I boat (more aggressive manners), look around the place and board a dirty train at 8.30. I sit beside a man and his pleasant, polite wife. Soon we are joined by two scruffy-looking teenagers, one of them with zips, chains and safety pins attached to his trousers. I am slightly alarmed at their appearance, but they turn out to be quite civilized and friendly. One of the lads is fascinated to hear about my experiences in Japan. Although I have started to correct my diary, I put it away in order to talk to them.

The train is due to leave at 8.45, but there is an announcement informing us that due to signal failure along the line, there will be a delay. It is a depressing experience to be stuck in a cold, dirty train, in a bleak station, and in such dull, overcast weather.

At last we get going at nine o'clock and travel at a snail's pace. Several times we stop in the middle of nowhere – awaiting signals, I presume. However, it is pleasant to see the gentle English countryside once again. There are no dramatic mountains or rugged bays here: just simple landscapes with fields, hedges and trees. Now and then

there are farmhouses, villages and canals with barges. Despite the dull light and grey clouds, the grass is green and the scenery is welcoming. Now it feels pleasant to be back in familiar surroundings. Apart from a few exceptions, gone are the ugly cities, the industrial areas, and the endless pylons supporting electric cables that I have seen so often in Japan.

Slowly we make our way to Holyhead. The relative silence on the train is deafening; no babble of voices, no inane jingles, and no announcements. We chat together in lowered voices. At Crewe, where the engine is changed, we hop out to buy coffee and sandwiches from a man with a trolley. By now it is midday and I feel hungry.

When we set off again, the two lads have left us, and we are joined by a colourful southern Asian family: a large man in a smart suit, two ladies and a little boy. When the English husband and wife leave at Chester, the family make themselves at home, sprawling themselves across the seats and dozing. The little boy sleeps soundly.

We finally arrive at Holyhead, where it is raining, at 3.30 p.m., an hour late. Passengers for the Sealink boat leave immediately; those for the B+I hang around in the waiting room. I buy myself a hot cup of tea and some more sandwiches, then ring home. Once again I talk briefly to my mother and tell her that I should be arriving on time.

We are then driven to the boat by coach. On the coach, and again on the boat, I meet some young people who are members of a small orchestra; they will be playing for a ballet that will be staged in the newly refurbished Gaiety Theatre in Dublin. I make friends with two girls and a fellow, and stay with them for the duration of the journey. Although it is bitterly cold, we spend most of the time out on deck – it is far better than being inside. At one stage we go indoors to the bar to buy drinks; I accept their kind offer of a hot whiskey. I hope that we are going to stay here in the warm, but no – we go outside again, where my whiskey soon turns cold! I now sit beside one of the girls, Anne, and chat to her; she seems to be a pleasant and quiet young lady. As she likes the tranquillity of the countryside and thinks that keeping with the others may prove to be a little trying, I volunteer to take her out for a spin in the car some day, and give her my telephone number.

Later, when it becomes too cold, we adjourn to the bar, where a noisy band is playing. Anne and I exchange glances, but we somehow put up with the din. She certainly has the chance to see the Irish in action here: all of them are lowering pints and steadily becoming inebriated.

At last it is time to disembark. At 8.15 p.m. we are off the boat and a few minutes later I meet my mother outside. We quickly find where my father has parked the car, and off we set for home. How quiet the house seems! I give my presents of the tea sets and a doll to my mother, and apologise for the loss of my jumper. Fortunately she is not in the least upset. Dad and I then go out for a brisk walk and a chat, then return for supper, during which I begin to tell my parents about my experiences. I stop at about 11.30, as dad is beginning to nod off. As he is off to England with a friend tomorrow morning, he begins to pack his case when I say goodnight and go to bed. Exhausted by now and feeling the after-effects of jetlag and the long, noisy journey, I am soon asleep and in the land of dreams.

## Postscript

Unfortunately, I never received a telephone call from Anne, the girl whom I had met on the boat, and so lost contact with her.

The girl I had met in the hostel in Kyoto, who intended to travel to Ireland sometime, never did so, but the monk I had met on Mount Kōya came as planned. I met him in Dublin city centre some time later; we visited Trinity College and had a meal together in a nearby restaurant.

When I was in Japan in 1984, most of the writing and printing was done from top to bottom, starting on what we would call the back page, but some was also done in the Western manner, from left to right. Nowadays, most of it (especially on websites), goes from left to right, and from the front page to the back.

It was much later when I finally surmised why Japanese people tend to keep their distance from Westerners in trains and other forms of public transport. I suspect that this is due to body odour. Eastern people sweat far less than Westerners, and also have less body hair. Smelly armpits are a rarity in the East, and if somebody does have this unfortunate condition, they are shunned by others – I learned this later from a Chinese friend. Japanese people, as I discovered, are almost paranoid about keeping themselves clean and free of bad odours. However, I feel that the Japanese have become more tolerant of Western habits and standards by now, thanks to better education and more social intercourse with foreigners.

Some years after I had travelled around Japan, I gave a lecture in the Chester Beatty Library (then in Shrewsbury Road, Dublin) about Chinese architecture in Japan, to members of the Irish Chinese Cultural Society. After I had finished, a lady in charge of the Japanese collection in the library thanked me, and told the audience that, thanks to my photographs, she had seen parts of her country that she had never been able to visit. She explained that travelling around Japan was quite restricted for most Japanese people, as official permission was needed in order to go to different regions. Foreigners, however, had free access to wherever they wanted to travel.

As stated in the text, in all probability I was being followed when walking around Moscow on my own. I have since discovered that this practice was not started during the Soviet Communist era, but much earlier – during the Imperial period, when all foreigners within the Russian Empire were followed and observed closely.

Finally, and not surprisingly, the old kopek coin that I had been given on the Trans Siberian Express was never returned to me. How on earth could an Irish postman read an address written in the Cyrillic alphabet?