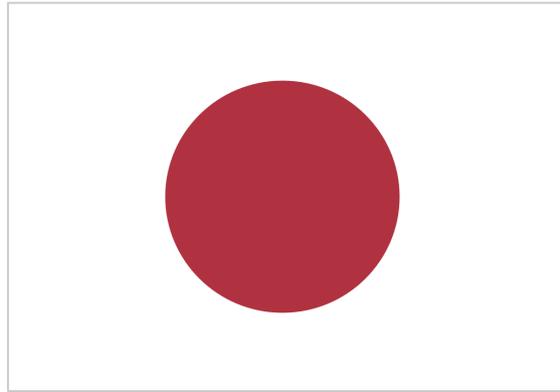


Part Two:



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(Nihon or Nippon)

JAPAN

4: To Yokohama

On board the ship, my passport is checked again (it had been checked just before I had left the customs inspection) and I join a queue to get an embarkation card. Once I have this, I find my way to my cabin: quite a comfortable little room despite the fact that I have opted for the cheapest category.

As it is now 12.30 p.m. and time for lunch, I quickly find the *Vladivostok* restaurant: quite a smart place staffed with efficient, pretty waitresses. I share a table with a pleasant Australian girl and a delightful Russian couple; the husband speaks excellent English and is a tour leader. Compared with what we have been eating on the train, the food is excellent. Our lunch begins with two starters: Russian herring with salad, followed by more fresh salad. The main course is a substantial-looking (and very filling) meat ball with a fried egg, vegetables and rice. With the meal we are given a veritable mountain of bread and we finish with a glass of fruit juice. I chat with the Australian girl, who is going to Japan for as long as she likes in order to study the language.

Full and feeling drowsy after lunch, I take a nap in my cabin and write some postcards. I then decide to tackle a very temperamental washing machine in the corridor. Eventually, after a lot of experimentation and help from a stewardess and an electrician, we get it to work. However, because of a faulty door latch, which keeps loosening and switching off the machine, I have to stand nearby for the best part of the afternoon, keeping an eye on it. When other people discover its existence and decide to wash their clothes, I find myself having to explain how to operate it and make sure that the door remains closed.



On board the M.S. *Khabarovsk*

Later I take a break for some afternoon tea in the restaurant and return to the damned washing machine. Eventually I find time to sit out on deck with the others, enjoying the sun and benefitting from another lesson in Japanese given by Nori. Afterwards I help somebody else with their washing and later I have the great pleasure of taking a *hot* shower—what bliss!

Soon it is seven o'clock and time for dinner. On my way to the restaurant I meet a German girl who was on the train, who very kindly tells me that I am the nicest person she has met on the trip so far. (She obviously hasn't encountered me in a foul humour!) She also tells me that I am the first Irish person whom she has ever met. Arthur's wife Jill also has kind words for me. 'If only you were twenty years older...!' she says.

Dinner turns out to be as excellent as the lunch: we are served cold meat, fresh salad, fish, creamed potatoes and vegetables, and for afters, a *real orange*. This is the first orange that I have eaten in two weeks!

After dinner I go on deck to enjoy the sunset, then go downstairs to write out a new set of instructions on how to operate the crazy washing machine in order to save me any more bother dealing with mystified people. This done, I sort out a few of my things, then go to the reading room, where I write my diary and a letter home on some borrowed paper. And so to bed.

Up at eight this morning. Out on the deck I get my first glimpse of Japan: we are passing through the strait between the main island of Honshū and the northern island of Hokkaido. Japan is a nation of islands – some 6,852 of them, though I expect many of them are just rocks! It is a fine, fresh sunny morning and I can see land and mountains rising from the deep blue sea. What an exhilarating sight!

At half past eight I go down to the restaurant for a very large and solid Russian breakfast: juice, then cold meat and salad, followed by an omelette and cheese with bread and tea. Afterwards I join the others on deck and enjoy the pleasure of lazing in the sun and invigorating fresh air, while watching the spectacular view. I get chatting to an English girl who is on her way to Japan and then China with a friend; I write down some useful words in Japanese for her and give her tips about China. At eleven o'clock we join her friend for a visit to the ship's bridge in order to have a look at the equipment. The radar and satellite screens are particularly impressive.

Afterwards I return to the upper deck and, as I am alone, I study some more Japanese. I must restrict myself to learning simple sentences from a phrase book, for I have come to the conclusion that Japanese must be the most difficult and convoluted language on the planet. It is easy enough to pronounce, but the grammar is an absolute nightmare. One peculiarity of the language is that certain adjectives are conjugated like verbs, and must agree with the verbs. Also, verbs (and adjectives) have positive and negative forms – you can't just put 'not' before them. Hence, saying something as simple as 'it was not hot' is extremely difficult in Japanese as both the verb and the adjective must be in the negative form of the past tense.

Another major complication is the fact that there are several levels of vocabulary, combined with the use of honorifics (e.g., *o-*, 'honourable...'), which are used to indicate the relative status of the speaker, the listener and the people mentioned. Put simply, the vocabulary you use when speaking to a newspaper vendor is substantially different from what you use when speaking to a government minister. So far I've come across two versions of the verb 'to be': *desu* and *gozaimasu*. I would use the first in a simple question such as, '*yūsu hosutero wa doko desu ka?*' ('where is the youth hostel?') but when greeting a person to whom I wish to show respect, I would say, '*o-hayō gozaimasu!*' ('it is honourably early', meaning 'good morning!').

The use of these honorifics and the general tendency to show respect to those above one's station in life results in a great deal of circumlocution (and bowing). Direct questions, such as 'What age are you?' or 'Are you married?' are considered to be rude and so information must be carefully and respectfully teased out of a superior

by more circuitous means, resulting in a great deal of word-weaving. Japanese is well equipped for this task; it is a language made for obliqueness, politeness, poetry and allusion, for expressing feelings, and for underlining individual or social circumstances.

The Japanese language is written using three different types of script. The first type consists of Chinese characters (*kanji*), which were imported by scholars, along with Chinese culture, between the fifth and seventh centuries AD. Chinese characters, like our numbers, convey meaning but not the sound of the word, which means that they can be read in any language, providing you can remember what the symbols stand for (and there are thousands of them). An example is the character 山, which in Chinese is pronounced *shān*. If we know what the character stands for, we would say ‘mountain’, but a French person would say *montagne*, a German would say ‘Berg’, and so on. On seeing this character Japanese people have two options: pronouncing it in their version of ancient Chinese, which is *san*, or pronouncing it in their native language as *yama*. Chinese is a monosyllabic language in which nouns, adjectives and verbs have no grammatical endings. Japanese, on the other hand, is a highly inflected polysyllabic language, which requires phonetic symbols to represent grammatical endings and spell native words. There are two sets of these: *hiragana*, which is cursive, and *katakana*, which is angular. Many verbs in Japanese start with a Chinese character, which is followed by *hiragana* symbols which give the sounds of the grammatical endings. Here is an example: 忘れる (Chinese character: 忘 *wasu*, plus two *hiragana* symbols: れる *we ru* – hence, *wasuweru* ‘forget’). The *katakana* angular symbols are generally used for company names and certain foreign words: an example is ヤマハ (*ya-ma-ha* or ‘Yamaha’). In addition to these three forms of writing, the Latin alphabet is often used for foreign names, words and phrases.

Confusingly, combinations of certain Chinese characters and *hiragana* symbols can alter their meanings completely. For example, the greeting *konnichiwa* is written with two Chinese characters and one *hiragana* symbol.

The first character on its own, 今, is pronounced *ima* and means ‘now’.

The second character on its own, 日, can be pronounced either *ni*, meaning ‘sun’, or *ichi*, meaning ‘day’.

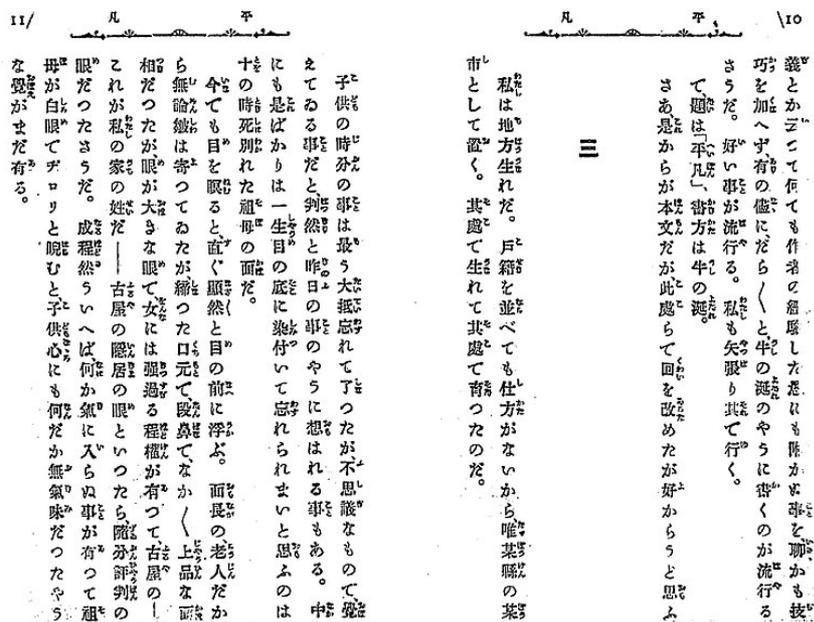
However, the two characters together, 今日, are pronounced *kyō*, meaning ‘today’.

When you add the *hiragana* symbol は ‘wa’ (which in this case does not mean anything specific), you get 今日は: *kon-nichi-wa* – ‘hello!’ or ‘good day!’

The strain put on a young student’s memory when learning thousands of Chinese characters and dozens of Japanese symbols must be enormous. I am inclined to believe that the discipline of learning and remembering such a complicated language and writing system must have an effect on a person’s way of thinking and that this may explain why the Japanese tend to be poor at inventing but excellent at copying and improving. Where their language comes from, nobody seems to know. Some experts claim that the structure of the language (but not the vocabulary) is very similar to the language structure of the Ainu people, who were the original inhabitants of the islands. Only a few of these people now live on Hokkaido, the island that we have passed in the ship. Originally they were fair-haired, bearded people who are believed to have come from the regions now known as Scandinavia, Finland and Lapland.

A curious thing about the Japanese language, which many people have noticed and ridiculed, is the absence of the letter ‘L’. ‘L’ is used frequently in Chinese and ‘R’ infrequently, but in Japanese ‘R’ is used all the time and ‘L’ never. A Chinese person

will pronounce ‘Lorelei’ *Lolelei*, whereas a Japanese pronounces it *Rorerei*. The sounds associated with V and X do not feature in the Japanese language.



Two pages from a Japanese novel, 二葉亭四迷 *Futabatei Shimei*, 1908.
(Courtesy Hatukanezumi)

Finally, although Japanese is sometimes printed in the same manner as Western literature, most Japanese printed material begins on what we would call the back page. The text is read downwards from the top right, moving from right to left in the traditional Chinese style. In the illustration above, page 10 is on the right and page 11 is on the left; chapter 3 begins at the left of page 10, after the 三 (3). The Chinese characters can easily be distinguished from the cursive *hiragana* symbols. In newspapers and magazines, foreign words are often printed in the Latin alphabet, though turned sideways so that they follow the direction of the Japanese text.

At 12.30 p.m. I put away my phrase book and go to the restaurant for lunch. Again I am joined by the Russian couple and the Australian girl. Although I have not ordered it, I start with herring and salad, which is what I have eaten yesterday, then try some pickled vegetables and dried fish. When the waitress brings me borscht soup, I realize that a mistake has been made and that I am being given somebody else’s order. The borscht is taken away and replaced with Japanese miso soup, which is not bad. Then comes the *teriyaki*, which certainly does not look or taste Japanese. It is chicken (I think), rice and vegetables cooked in a very Russian manner. After the meal, the Russian couple leaves and I chat to the Australian girl for a while.

I spend the afternoon on deck again, lazing, dozing, reading and studying more Japanese. It clouds over a little and becomes slightly cool, but the weather is fine. Today everyone is subdued and in the mood for relaxing. I am enjoying the rest, but know that I will die of boredom if this period of inaction lasts too long. I pop down to the restaurant at 4.30 for a cup of tea and a large slice of cake, and show the Australian girl my phrase book. I return to the deck, where I remain for the rest of the afternoon.

I then take a quick shower and hurry down to the restaurant for the captain's dinner. Nearly everyone has dressed for the occasion, but I have not: I'm still wearing my newly-washed tee shirt, which reveals my neck, now red after today's sun and wind. The starter consists of cold tongue and salad, served with a generous shot of vodka and a little red caviar. The main dish is rather disappointing: tough steak, thin chips and cold vegetables, served with white wine. The meal finishes with iced coffee with a blob of ice cream in it (delicious!) and a huge, juicy apple. The fresh vegetables and the fruit are the best part of the meal.

Afterwards I find my way to the reading room, where I try to decide what exactly I will do tomorrow. A young Swiss chap has encouraged me to try hitch-hiking and has given me valuable information on cheap accommodation in Japan, where, he warns me, everything is very expensive. Later I go up to the 'music salon' with a certain degree of reluctance to see a performance of Russian song and dance. Just as I expect, it is rather noisy and touristy, though the dancing is quite spectacular. The musicians all look bored stiff. Fortunately the performance only lasts for half an hour. I then escape to the reading room to write my diary and finally hit the sack.

Another hot, sunny morning; it is the last day of our journey. After another solid and excellent breakfast I sit outside for a while on the deck, taking one or two photos of my companions. Nori gives me his address very cleverly embedded in an *origami* creation. The morning passes quickly and soon it is time for lunch. Once again, I try a couple of dishes that are poor attempts at Japanese cuisine. After the meal I thank the waitress in Russian; she replies, 'Good luck!' I then go down to my cabin to pack up my things.

Later I move to the top deck, where there is some shade, and study a little more Japanese as we turn into Tokyo bay. A thriving port, it is an impressive sight. We anchor and there is a long delay while we wait our turn. At last a tug comes chugging towards us, turns the ship around and we are guided towards the harbour. As a number of officials have boarded, we gather in the music salon for immigration and customs. We finally dock at the harbour but there is another delay: a young man has not appeared for the customs check. This is due to a case of sickness on board: the silly American tourist has taken an overdose of sea-sickness pills, has drunk alcohol on top of this and then has lain in the sun for too long. I am told that a Hungarian doctor gave him acupuncture treatment this morning. A little earlier, when we were anchored and waiting, the ship was flying the yellow duster, as it was thought that the fellow had contracted meningitis.

There is a growing sensation of excitement as we wait to disembark. According to our watches, it is now 4 p.m., but we are told to put them back one hour as it is 3 p.m. here. This means that we are two hours behind Nakhodka time – crazy! At last we begin moving and walk down the gangplank and on to Japanese soil – or rather concrete. До свидания, Советский Союз! 日本, 今日は! – goodbye Soviet Union, hello Japan!