

# "Alice in Wonderland"

By Filiz Başkut

When I was a little girl I often heard my elders speaking about a country called Japan where the people wore *kimonos*, where houses were built of very light material against earthquakes and where there was a huge mountain called "Fuji Yama" (this is the name Turks have for Mount Fuji) which was sacred to all Japanese. Wow!! This place sounded like a wonderland in fairy tales. Each time I heard its name pronounced I felt the curiosity grow in me, forcing me to visualize this wonderland and its sacred mountain.

Between 1991 and 1996 in Rumania where my husband was Ambassador of Turkey, I had the chance to get to know some ladies from the Japanese Diplomatic Corps. Their gentle and friendly company made me eager to learn more about their country. Knowing how much I would appreciate their help in this matter, my Japanese friends took the initiative in briefing me on the Japanese lifestyle.

To start with, I was offered traditional Japanese food and drink, which I found tasty yet different from what I was used to. Next, they made me eat with the famous chopsticks, requiring all my energy to manipulate at that time. While all this was happening, I had the feeling that I was like "Alice" in wonderland.

When the time came to bid farewell to my Japanese friends, they all expressed the wish to see me one day in Japan. Well, their wish came true in 1998 when we were posted to Japan.

On our first day in Japan while rolling to Tokyo from Narita Airport, I was stunned by the extraordinary sight of the city which lay before us with its impressive skyscrapers, remarkably



Mrs. Başkut (second from left) with Japanese and Turkish friends at a kimono show at the Turkish Embassy

designed modern buildings and unbelievably well established transportation systems. Then I realized that I was stepping into a wonderland where things looked different from what I had imagined in my childhood. Suddenly, I felt a strong desire to find out the wonders of this country.

For almost all foreigners, the image of a Japanese woman with traditional hair style, wearing a kimono and holding a fan is the ultimate symbol of Japan. With this particular image in their minds, people who come to Japan for the first time expect to see all Japanese women wearing kimonos. I, too, had the same expectation. But when I came to Japan, I found much to my surprise, all Japanese women dressed up in fashionable Western style clothes. Subsequently, I came to the conclusion that the introduction of a new lifestyle into the Japanese society might have persuaded women to alter their wardrobes. Even today, however, we see some Japanese women wearing kimonos on festive occasions. I personally wish to see Japanese women more often in their kimonos which, with no doubt, make them look more stunning and graceful.

Before coming to Japan, I could have never imagined myself becoming a great Sumo fan. At that time it was hard for me to understand the significance of the rituals carried out by the wrestlers. It also seemed to be an easy job to put down or to thrust out one's opponent.

After having been invited to watch the Sumo tournament for the second time, I got acquainted with the essentials of the sport as well as the name, rank and the tactics of each wrestler. Furthermore, the cheers and

enthusiasm of the audience accelerated my interest in "Sumo" and made me a fervent supporter. Since then I have never missed a single tournament and I always cross my fingers for the victory of my favorite wrestlers. I think that Sumo Wrestling is not only a traditional sport but also a spectacular display of power, skill and determination.

Parallel to my fondness for Sumo, I take great interest in the art of growing miniature forms of nature like dwarf trees (*bonsai*). I think that the professionalism of the Japanese people in this field is the sheer evidence of an outstanding skill and hard work. The uniqueness of this achievement is worthy of great praise.

Another outstanding Japanese piece of work which I got acquainted with after I had come to Japan is the "Hina Doll." These dolls and the embellishments like chests, furniture, kitchen implements and carriages are the miniature replicas of those in the Imperial Court of ancient times. These replicas look unbelievably authentic in every detail. The style and the color of each dress represent different levels of status. The position of the body, arms and hands, including the fingers, indi-

Photo : Filiz Başkut

Photo : Filiz Başkut

cates the kind of work that one has to carry out. All these miniature dolls and embellishments are the marvellous masterpieces of skilful and meticulous Japanese artists who should be given big applause for their accomplishment.

As my new hobby, I now collect old Hina Dolls and it gives me great pleasure to see them ranged on the tiered stand.

Our residence building, designed by the famous Japanese architect Tange Kenzo has also affected my perception of Japan. The master architect, through a system of inner gardens, has created the utmost privacy while attaining maximum daylight in our residence. This mixture of both Japanese and Turkish concepts in the design is a good example of the similarities in our cultures.

Actually I have discovered many striking common points between Japan and my home country, Turkey.

Some theories converge upon the roots of our ancestors somewhere in Central Asia in deep history. According to those theories, Japanese migrated towards the east and settled in Japan, whereas Turks migrated towards the west, finally settling down in the Anatolian Peninsula where Turkey lies today.

We are not sure what really happened thousands of years ago but what we see is surprising evidence of similar cultures.

During my first few weeks in Japan, I tried to listen attentively to what was being said in Japanese so that I could

become familiar with the language. One day I heard someone say “*Ii desu ka?*” “*Hai ii desu.*” My goodness! I was familiar with those words. They sounded like Turkish. After a brief study I have discovered that the Japanese and Turkish languages are from the same family of languages called “Altaic Languages.” They have surprisingly similar grammatical rules and words with similar meanings. For example:

- The Japanese word “*Ii*” for good corresponds to the Turkish word “*Iyi*” for good
- The Japanese word “*Teppen*” for top corresponds to the Turkish word “*Tepe*” for top
- The Japanese word “*Hai*” for OK corresponds to the Turkish word “*Haihai*” for OK

It is due to these linguistic similarities that both Japanese and Turkish people have great aptitude for learning each other’s language.

There is of course further evidence concerning the similarities between the two countries. For example, Turkish people traditionally used *futon* type bedding like the Japanese and put them in closets during the day. They ate on low tables called “*sini*” like “*kotatsu*” in Japan. Although they are no longer practiced in many parts of Turkey today, people in rural areas still keep up these old customs. Like Japanese, Turks take off their shoes when entering the house.

The most valuable common points that the two countries share are the traditional respect for parents and elderly people and warm hospitality for guests.

During my stay in Japan, I realized that there is a great



Mrs. Başkut and her friends at a traditional Japanese restaurant in Kawagoe, Saitama Prefecture

interest and sympathy for Turkey and the Turkish people among the Japanese people. I felt this even more during the devastating earthquakes that struck Turkey in 1999. The Japanese people rushed to our Embassy to contribute whatever they could to the earthquake relief efforts. I experienced many emotional moments when little Japanese children brought and donated their piggy banks and Japanese world record holder athletes donated their trophies for the earthquake efforts.

I believe the same interest and sympathy for the Japanese people exists among the Turkish people. Recently I read an article in a major newspaper in Turkey. The article said that according to a survey conducted by the major newspaper, the Turks had selected the Japanese people as the foreigners they love the most. When the survey asked why they liked the Japanese people, most people were not able to give a specific reason. I think the reason lies in all the similarities that Turkish and Japanese people share.

In conclusion, I would like to say that my three-year stay in Japan has been extremely instructive for me to draw the true picture of the country, its people as well as its customs and traditions. I rejoice to know that, thanks to the cultural similarities, Japan and Turkey today have established everlasting friendly and fruitful ties. **JTI**

*Filiz Başkut is the wife of the Turkish Ambassador to Japan.*



Photo : Filiz Başkut

Ambassador and Mrs. Başkut in a beautiful Japanese garden in Niigata