

FROM MY CORNER OF TOKYO

By Ewa Axelson Kumlin

If I had been asked to write about my personal impressions of Japan one month after I had arrived, it would actually have been much easier than now, after a year and a half. I wonder what it would be like after five or ten years? The longer you stay, new layers, hidden messages, and continuous surprises will hit you. It never stops. The other day a foreign journalist friend told me that even after thirty-five years of living in Japan, every day brings something unexpected.

Already while flying in over Narita upon our arrival the visual impressions began: blue tile roofs, beautiful white painted kanji signs against black asphalt... I had never been to Asia or Japan before. I was thrilled. Next to me, a young Swedish mother was telling her little blond son: - "Eric, you must not be afraid now, because after we get off the plane, it is not empty like in Sweden, there will be lots and lots of people, crowded everywhere." When we came into the airport, it was completely empty and calm. A few airport staff in spotless uniforms bowed and politely showed us the way as we were reading the big sign above us - "Welcome to Japan - Please follow the rules." Visiting the bathroom also deserves an entire chapter by itself, with the heated seat and the many functions of the toilet panel, you think you have come into the cockpit of a plane.

In Japan Ambassadors are big shots. Upon our first arrival, we were met by an official delegation, who rushed up to my important husband and greeted him, liberated him from his luggage, while me, my children and our dog were hanging along the best we could. Driving in from Narita, we were cruising among shining brand-new cars, many of them black and

limousine-like with the seats covered in white lace, and drivers in white gloves glancing at their computerized road maps on the front panels. (Until this day I have yet to see a dirty car in Japan). We drove on the multileveled expressways, making a detour onto the extra circle into the bay, before arriving at our embassy, our home to be for some years.

Every day brings a new surprise. The biggest surprise is Tokyo itself. How is it possible? All these people together - some 30 million including the suburbs - managing to move around smoothly in this limited space and in such an efficient way. The trains, subways, and not least, the incredible automatic ticket machines in all stations, never cease to function.

Of course, in a city this size, there have to be a lot of problems with crime, violence and homelessness. But compared to any other world city, they are remarkably few. Tokyo is still safe, peaceful, clean and well-organized. And expecting to meet heavy pollution, it was wonderful to be able to breathe fresh air instead. Tokyo must be one of the miracles of our time. Where else could I let my twelve-year old son go by himself by subway anywhere in the city? Where else could I walk outside at night by myself without feeling any fear? What a privilege to experience some years in a place like this!

Right from the beginning, on weekends, we took the subway to different stations at random to discover new parts of Tokyo. We used to believe that our Stockholm subways were clean. Until we came here. Always someone around to



Tokyo - forever changing

Photo: Lars Tunbjörk

wash the floors and walls. Once I asked a Japanese friend "How come there are no graffiti in the subways?" The answer was simple: "It is not permitted." He did not even say "forbidden!"

During our exploratory trips we found new worlds at each station. I learned to love places like Harajuku with all the colorful young people, or Kappabashi with its ceramics and the amazing plastic foods (perfect gifts) and even the old corners of Asakusa... The list is endless. If you at any time want a change from Japanese cuisine, which doesn't happen very often, you can easily find perfect variations of French, Italian, German or any kind of restaurant and it is even more realistic than the real thing. You sit there and try to figure out what is different, apart from the fact that all the waiters are Japanese and everything is slightly smaller. There is still an unreal feeling around, perhaps it is too perfect to be true?

Compared to a city like New York, with the constant noise of honking taxis and screaming voices on the streets, or even Athens, where we had just arrived from, I found Tokyo very quiet for a big city. The traffic is amazingly subdued. Yet there are

always some noises going on: western music in department stores and even in traditional Japanese restaurants (to my great disappointment, I wanted to hear a *shamisen* or bamboo flute) and electronic voices speaking out of elevators and machines all around you.

Another favorite part of the city is Shinjuku, with its energy and dynamism and conglomerate of new skyscrapers, many of them from the time of the bubble economy. Coming up to the top floor in any of them, I'm sure that at some point the same thought crosses everybody's mind: what happens if there is a big earthquake now? Everyone is waiting for the Big Earthquake, the only question is where and when. Tomorrow everything can be destroyed, and we have to start all over again. This has already happened so many times in Japan's history, with earthquakes, typhoons, floods, and lately, with 1923's big earthquake and the bombings during the Second World War. It seems to have created a humble attitude before the forces of nature, and an acceptance of quick and radical changes. One Japanese friend told me that what he liked most about Tokyo, was driving every day on the expressway and following the constant changes of the cityscape.

Looking out from the 52nd floor in the New York Grill at the Park Hyatt Hotel, with Tokyo by night at your feet, you slowly start to get a notion of how huge this city really is. And when, among all the thousands of lights, I find the familiar landmark of Tokyo Tower (which I considered so tasteless in the beginning) shining bright and orange, way down there, I become all warm inside. I point at it, and I know that below there somewhere is my home.

I also take my dog for a walk near Tokyo Tower every morning. Those daily walks are an important part of my Tokyo life. During that first drive in from Narita, little did I know that, among the many high-rise buildings



Visitors are always greeted with a bow

Photo: Lars Tunbjörk

and endless gray facades, you will find small hidden green parks or minuscule gardens. I only have to cross the street from where I live to find old wooden houses, narrow lanes with tiny ladies, bent with age, hanging out their newly washed clothes or watering their many potted plants in the morning. Right there and then, you have no idea that you are in the middle of one of the world's largest cities. These house owners don't seem to care in the least that they are sitting on extremely expensive land, they just want to live in peace and they refuse to move. By now I recognize most of them and we have started to nod politely and make small comments about the weather - at least that is what I think we do. A few blocks further down, you find yourself in the middle of the pulsating life and glittering lights of Roppongi crossing.

Walking in the morning is like watching a new sequence of a movie every day. Apart from all the salarymen on their way to work, I meet the same street cleaners every few meters sweeping the leaves off the road and emptying garbage. Outside the bank, there are sweet old ladies in blue pants and jackets, on a cold day they might even wear a cotton face mask. It seems like they are cutting the bushes with nail scissors and pulling weeds with tweezers. Sometimes there are roadworks going on, but a policeman in a white helmet (helmet and gloves can protect you against everything in Japan) with a light stick has rolled out a rubber carpet for pedestrians to walk safely on under his polite and bowing guidance. Further down the road by one of the

new construction sites, I hear Japanese popular music coming out from a small turquoise plastic tape recorder. When I peek in, I see a whole bunch of construction workers doing their morning gymnastics in traditional wide blue pants, cloven-footed fabric shoes, a towel wrapped around their heads with a helmet on top.

Sometimes, members of the local police force join in and exercise. One morning I met an unusually distinguished man in dark blue uniform and golden buttons and I wondered which institution he represented, until I saw him carefully scrubbing the parking meters.

Since the beginning I've also been meeting this very elegant lady in a chic tailored suit and jewelry and a young man looking like a smart art director in designer clothes who greeted me in a friendly manner every morning and I wondered who they were. It took a couple of weeks before I realized that they were part of the daily maintenance company of our embassy, and this is how posh they look while going to and from work.

Of course, not knowing the language, I will always remain an observer, even if these walks give me a good opportunity to practice Japanese. I haven't given up yet and keep struggling with lessons. After having tried the textbook "Japanese for busy people" for some months, my patient teacher tried to encourage me by giving me a new book named "Japanese for Young People," as if that might help. Dave Barry, the American columnist, wrote in his book on Japan that the only reliable method to learn Japanese is to be born in Japan by Japanese parents, and not even that guarantees full success.

Our teenage children are of course embarrassed when I try to order in Japanese restaurants. Before I have even come halfway in my first greeting phrase they have already put up two fingers and said in perfectly understandable English "two cokes please." My husband, who can't remember the word for "one" in

Japanese, always orders two *-futatsu-* beers for himself, since this is the only number he can use.

Most of my colleagues are clever enough to realize that learning Japanese is an impossible mission in the few years we will normally stay here. Instead, they make use of the many unique opportunities we as diplomatic wives are offered to learn about traditional Japanese culture, ink drawing, calligraphy, tea ceremony, music, gardening, flower arrangements and all those art forms of refined beauty, simplicity and stillness that make up the image we all carry with us of traditional Japan. I don't believe that there is anywhere else in the world, where diplomats are as well treated as here in Japan. All doors are open and you are offered experiences you could never have dreamt of. I hope we could stay long enough to see everything. Instead of starting from the historical aspect, I have begun with contemporary culture. Perhaps I will find the roots there as well. In all our previous postings I have been eager to learn which are the questions of today? What is happening among the young generations in the various art forms? If stillness and refined beauty are truths of Japan, the opposite is just as true. The strong contrasts of Tokyo life are part of the creative tension. Anything can coexist and anything is possible. Here in Japan, I also find an affinity and similarity with the new art trends in Nordic countries.

Without the language however, we realize that we can never really come inside Japanese life. Being a Swede, it would be difficult to become a Japanese. Of course you start bowing, like a reflex, and you know that you have been here for a while when you start bowing over the phone as well. The only Japanese thing about me, I'm afraid, is that I can fall asleep anywhere at any time in a moving vehicle, on the train, the subway and in the taxi. Even in the theater. There is a very clever Japanese invention, a small alarm clock that you can put in your ear,



Photo: Ewa Axelson Kumlin

Every morning of the year Mr. Hasegawa comes to the park to sweep and clean all the benches

which you can set to go off in 5 or 10 minutes. Talking about gadgets, it is absolutely necessary nowadays in Japan, to be equipped with a pedometer, to measure the amount of steps you take. To keep in good health, you must reach 10,000 steps a day. The gadgets deserve an article on their own.

Now back to my morning walk, where I can follow the seasons in the midst of camellias, azaleas, cherry blossoms, dogwood and maple trees. Along the road, big black ravens are squeaking every now and then, as if to remind us of some underlying threat. I pass skyscrapers, shops and small wooden houses. Here and there a little temple. In front of the children's monument with small statuettes dressed in red knitted hats and napkins, someone rushing on their way to work, stops for a moment to pay their respect.

The park is my favorite spot. It has an ongoing life of its own. We start with a small cocktail party for the dogs from the neighboring area on the sports field. Further inside the park, if the weather is sunny, I find the man who adores the sun. He comes out from nowhere with all his belongings in two bags and an umbrella. He shakes his long black hair and positions himself absolutely still for about half an hour just to look up towards the sun, as we walk by. We pretend that we don't see each other, although we both are completely aware of each other's presence. Once my dog and I are out of the magic inner circle of the park, he starts looking at us.

The main actor in the park is Mr. Hasegawa. Mr. Hasegawa arrives early every morning, winter and summer, weekends or weekdays, come rain or come shine. Every day he sweeps the entire park. Each one of the ten park benches is meticulously cleaned. This procedure is a ritual: He has a green plastic bucket, which he fills with water. He rinses his cloth, folds it three times and starts his vigorous cleaning, leaning over the bench. Every single board is washed four times back and forth. First, he takes the front part of the bench, and then he continues with the back. Nothing can disturb or change his routine. We exchange a few additional words every day. If we don't come, he asks where we have been. I don't know where he comes from or where he lives or why he does this every day, but I do know that he is filled with duty and pride. Out of all the thousands of people we meet in our lives as diplomats, Mr. Hasegawa will always stand out in my memory. I can't help thinking of what will happen to Mr. Hasegawa and all devoted people like him, if Japanese society changes someday.

After a year and a half, I have barely finished exploring the corners of my own block. And I still struggle to go beyond saying "good morning, nice weather" in Japanese to my friend in the park. I hope I will be blessed by being allowed to stay here for many more years. Tokyo is still out there: everything that we can possibly imagine is still to be discovered, we will never be finished.

At nightfall, I take yet another walk with our dog. The last thing I hear, while passing the rolling escalator near our house, is the recorded soft voice of a woman, who speaks continuously, 24 hours a day, by this hour all by herself, announcing into the silent night that "You are now approaching the end of the escalator - please watch your step!" **UJI**

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