

“Kokusaika?” Internationalization

By Margaret Edwards

After my arrival in Japan almost a year ago, I became increasingly aware of the concept of internationalization. The word “*kokusaika*” enters into conversations all over Japan as we travel to a variety of cities, towns and schools. Now I have come to realize just how seriously this theme has been addressed in Japan for many years.

Meeting with students and educators in the three different schools I visited was a great pleasure as well as an honor. From numerous parents and school officials I learned that “*kokusaika*” is still an important goal for many. Certain schools are conscientiously programming curricula based upon their high expectations for internationalization. Some schools excel at educating Japanese young people for life in a global society with frequent exchanges and visits to all corners of the world.

One of my most recent school visits reminded me to take notice of the lengthy history of important educational links between Japan and Canada. In the region of green tea, chrysanthemums, and the celebrated Mt. Fuji, I spoke to the students and staff of Shizuoka Eiwa Jogakuin (SEJ) in Shizuoka City. I knew that Canadian missionaries were responsible for the early establishment of this college but, while there, I learned that their close ties with Canada span a period of 113 years. I was eager to meet the students and professors of this well-respected institution and anxious to find out what questions the students might pose about educational opportunities in Canada.

Canadian links to the region of Shizuoka existed in the nineteenth century when Canadian missionaries working in Japan supported

education for girls and the building of schools for girls. In 1882, a Canadian woman by the name of Martha Cartmell was sent by the Women’s Missionary Society to Tokyo where she assisted with the planning of the Toyo Eiwa Jogakko. This school for girls opened in the Roppongi, Azabu area in 1884. A few years later, in 1887, the Shizuoka Eiwa Jogakko was founded on November 26, with a Canadian, Miss Martha Cunningham from Halifax, Nova Scotia, as its first principal. SEJ began educating girls for the first time in Shizuoka Prefecture.

Members of the Women’s Missionary Society were sent from Canada to this Shizuoka school where they acted as principals or English teachers and continued serving there until the Second World War forced them to return home. In spite of the War, the early links to Japan survived and many teachers were able to resume their positions in Japanese schools after the War ended.

It was a surprise to learn that the SEJ school uniforms had been adopted from the CGIT (Canadian Girls in Training) uniform worn in Canada in the 1920’s and perhaps earlier. I wore the uniform myself in the late 1950’s as a CGIT member at my local United Church in Ontario. Based upon Christian principles and service to others, CGIT helped introduce girls to worthwhile skills, interest groups and projects at weekly meetings. We wore the perfectly laundered sailor-styled *middy* blouse and navy-blue skirt with pride, just as the girls at SEJ do today. Their attractive school badge is a maple leaf!

Over the years, Shizuoka Eiwa Jogakuin has maintained contact with

several Canadian institutions and has extended the junior and senior high schools by adding a women’s junior college in 1966 under the leadership of a former director, Dr. Matsumoto Takuo. He visited Canada and fostered close relations between SEJ and the Ontario private girls’ school, Alma College, where many Japanese girls attended summer courses. Since those days SEJ has sent students to Balmoral Hall School, a sister school in Winnipeg, and to Toronto’s Bishop Strachan School where SEJ has also participated in teacher exchanges. In 1992 SEJ College established an affiliation with the Vancouver School of Theology, located on the University of British Columbia campus. In 1994 sixteen SEJ students studied at VST for nine months and since that time, SEJ has sent approximately eighteen students to the Vancouver School each year.

Is it any wonder that the SEJ high school choir has become so proficient at singing the national anthem of Canada? Or that senior students have the language skills to ask thoughtful questions on a range of educational issues about Canada? They can also sing songs in French, Canada’s other official language!

One student who spoke to me after the meeting asked where she might study Music Therapy in Canada, while another was interested in knowing about Canadian high school programs which prepare students for the job market upon high school graduation. One girl with remarkable English fluency asked about post-college job opportunities in Canada. This topic led to some discussion of Canada’s “*working-holiday*” program for young people. The Canadian Embassy in Tokyo currently issues 5000 visas each year

for this purpose, while the Government of Japan offers a similar arrangement to Canadian youth.

As a former music teacher, I was impressed by the accomplishments of the High School Choir and the choral director's choice of repertoire. Upon a quiet signal from him, a young student accompanist began her piano introduction to the choral arrangement of a Schubert "Gloria". Each singer, ready for the challenge, responded to the conductor with every note memorized. The girls followed his calm directions with clear voices and carefully blended three-part harmony. These young women sang "Glory to God in the Highest" with sincerity and vitality, filling the open spaces of the school's new Chapel with the beauty of disciplined voices. Later, when they performed Handel's "Hallelujah Chorus" from the Messiah, I thought for a moment that I was back in Canada's capital city, listening to one of our best treble choirs.

Another interesting school visit occurred last December when I accompanied my husband on his first official trip to Sendai. We were invited to visit Sendai's Tokiwagi Gakuen High School for girls and were greeted with Canadian flags and young music students singing "O Canada" better than most Canadian schools could manage.

A few minutes later we realized that the man who was conducting us to his office, was decked out in one of the brightest, shiniest, most colorful red and white maple-leaf, made-in-Canada ties we had ever seen in Japan or Canada. Here was a principal with a sense of humor, a good rapport with his students and a lot of experience with Canada and international travel!

Colorfully illustrated posters documenting the Canadian experience of the students lined the walls of the "International Class." They convinced us that Huntsville, Ontario (two hours north of Toronto) and the

Rocky Mountains of Alberta were perfect places to learn about nature, goodwill, and North American life. The girls obviously enjoyed the friendliness and natural beauty of these areas, but were caught off guard by the high school system in Ontario! Teachers had just gone out on strike, classes were cancelled and the homestay families were left to provide substitute programs. The Tokiwagi students must have been impressed by the freedom these teachers offered Ontario youth who had time off until the strike was resolved. Had they ever heard of teachers' strikes in Japan, I wondered?

We read and admired each student's poster, met the Canadian JET (Japanese Exchange and Teaching Program) who was assisting with English teaching at Tokiwagi and feasted upon much good music at the Tohoku-Canada Christmas party that evening. Many of the performers were musicians,

both students and alumni, who studied at Tokiwagi. Our photos still provide us with reminders of the families and individuals in Sendai who shared the marvellous spirit of a Canadian Christmas, miles from our home!

Last November, I was invited to tour Hiroshima's Waseda Junior High, a school which opened in 1995. The building's modern architecture, with rooms and hallways facing a central, open courtyard gave the impression of friendliness and stability. In the school office, a happy group of staff members and parents had assembled; I noticed that the principal's desk was completely free of clutter ... no typical piles of papers and file folders.

"I suppose you don't have much work to do in



Photo: Margaret Edwards

A chance to visit with the students after refreshments on the high school courtyard

this job!" I joked, when I saw his impeccably tidy workspace and compared it with memories of busy middle school offices and over-worked principals in Canada.

During the usual opening introductions, I met a Canadian JET, Chris Keefe, an alternate language teacher (ALT) who was assigned to several schools in the area. After tea, I visited one of his English classes and was impressed by the effective and interesting lesson he and the English teacher, a Japanese woman, had worked out for these grade seven students. Their model questions and answers about famous sports celebrities were later repeated by the students whose attention was focused on pictures of famous athletes attached to the front blackboard

"Does Michael Jordan play tennis? No, he does not. He plays basketball. Does Wayne Gretsky play hockey? Yes, Wayne Gretsky plays hockey." And so the lesson continued with a variety of questions and answers about popular athletes. The class responded very well to the questions when their turn came. They spoke clearly and carefully. But hearing their unison answers was unexpected after my teaching in Canada.

Canadian students might be asked to raise a hand and answer individually, but these young people replied as a team. It was more like a unison response from a religious group reciting important prayers. No one stood out and no one felt embarrassed if unsure of answers. The pace was a little slow as a result, but everyone was equally involved and was able to have a good English conversation work-out.

Dressed in good-looking school uniforms, the students gave their undivided attention to the teachers at the front. They looked tense and wanted to perform well for the visitor. With this age group of

students, I knew that ALTs had their work cut out for them. Choosing topics of conversation which would motivate young Japanese people to "give it a try" must be half the battle. Not an easy task for the JETs who have to rely on simple English and often elementary Japanese to explain what they want from their pupils. I believe that JETs make a significant difference to the variety of activities in school clubs, in addition to their English teaching duties. Their creative ideas and friendly relations with Japanese students during more relaxed activities provide important opportunities to assist with the aims of "kokusai."

During our last few minutes together the Waseda students were confident enough to stand up and ask well-rehearsed questions about my impressions of Hiroshima: ... the Inland Sea, how did I find it compared to the Sea of Japan to the north? And the specialty pancake food, *Okonomiyaki* ... did I prefer the Hiroshima kind or the one made

in Osaka? The exchange was fun with interesting questions. And when I was back in the car, I could not get my travel guidebooks out of my suitcase quickly enough to re-read the sections about this region of Japan. Their questions were a useful reminder to get on with my own "international" education!

Just before I left the classroom, another student courageously entered the conversation. In a clear, strong voice he asked a question that might have had Canadian students doubled over in laughter. But this young man was serious and was simply practising one of many important questions when learning any foreign language. He rose to his feet, looked me straight in the eye and said to the surprised visitor, "What is your te-le-phone num-ber?" **JJI**

Margaret Edwards is the wife of the Canadian Ambassador to Japan.



Photo: Margaret Edwards

The Edwards, accompanied by Mr. Kaneko Isao and Mr. David Bostwick, meet six Canadian members of the JET program and enjoy an evening walk under the "Festival of Lights" — Sendai