

# Alone in Rome

By Takao Okamura

Airborne. Flying the southern route to Rome, there was a mere smattering of Japanese in among the many foreigners. Now that Japanese are rich and seem to dominate international tourism and travel, it is hard to remember those early years shortly after the war when very few Japanese ventured abroad.

As if reflecting the low priority on travel between Japan and Europe, the air routes were drawn in a leisurely southern arc over and through the Arab lands. Only later were the northern routes over the then Soviet Union and the polar route by way of Anchorage developed, the routes getting progressively shorter as the Japanese got richer.

## Sense of loneliness

When I first went, there were tight government restrictions on how much foreign currency could be taken out of the country, and I was limited to a mere \$200. Yet this restriction paled beside the thrill of my first airplane ride—my first time ever outside of Japan. Except for one seasoned diplomat, all of us Japanese huddled at Haneda awaiting the boarding call were first-timers. After years of living only among ourselves, we were being thrust out into a world of foreigners, and there was an almost palpable mix of excitement and anxiety in the air.

Even today, when international news is easy to come by and Japanese seem to be ubiquitous in even the most remote outposts, Japanese still feel a sense of loneliness the first time they venture away from their sheltered homeland.

"Where are you going?" Screwing up my courage, I asked the tall Caucasian sitting beside me. It was my first English sentence outside of Japan—normally an act of great courage for Japanese—made easier for me by my experience as an interpreter for the Occupation forces. Yet in response to this painfully wrought question, I got just a shrug of incomprehension. What?! There are foreigners who do

not speak English? This was a major revelation to someone brought up to believe that all foreigners were American and the whole rest of the world spoke English.

Yet before I had time to recover, a middle-aged Japanese technician on his way to Kuwait's oil fields asked, "Excuse me. I don't speak any English. Could you fill this out for me?" "This" was the disembarkation card we had to have at every stop—even if it was just a fueling stop. No sooner was that done than, "Excuse me, but could you do mine too, please?" This time it was a young electrician going to work in the Middle East. My English studies were finally paying off, and I was even a little proud of myself for being able to help these people. At the same time, I envied anyone who had been born into an English-speaking society—born with the gift of English.

At the time, we were approaching Rangoon (now Yangon). This was back in the propeller days, when it took a good 48 hours to fly from Tokyo to Rome, with a number of refueling stops along the way.

We had lunch at the Rangoon airport, grouped around big round tables in the restaurant. The middle-aged oil-driller sat down next to me. Obviously ill-at-ease and anxious, he stuck right by my side each stop of the way.

The dark-skinned waiter brought out the appetizers first on a silver tray. Then he started to pass them around the table, beginning with the oldest person present—my new acquaintance.

"Wonder if there aren't any chopsticks around here? Using these metal implements makes me feel like I'm acting in a play instead of having something to eat," the man confided to me. In fact, he had mentioned earlier in the plane that it was the first time he'd ever been out of his hometown and that he was very uncomfortable with foreign ways.

This discomfort was obvious in the way he avoided the waiter's eyes and kept his head turned toward me. Not taking the tray of appetizers when it was offered, he

feigned not even to notice it. But if he doesn't take any, then the rest of us won't get to eat either.

Irritated at him, I was also irritated at the waiter—who simply stood there silently holding the tray, seemingly impervious to our plight. After several minutes, I noticed that I was not the only one who was beginning to fidget.

"You know, if you don't take any, we can't pass the appetizers around for the rest of the people."

"What's that? Oh, the appetizers. Yes, of course," he said, as though he was just noticing them. Then he turned to the waiter and gingerly reached out with his fork to stab a few olives for himself. The ice had been broken, and it was my turn next. Thinking I would show the old man—to say nothing of the assembled foreigners—my proficiency at Western table manners, I confidently reached out with my fork and spoon and got some of the cold cuts, pickles and olives.

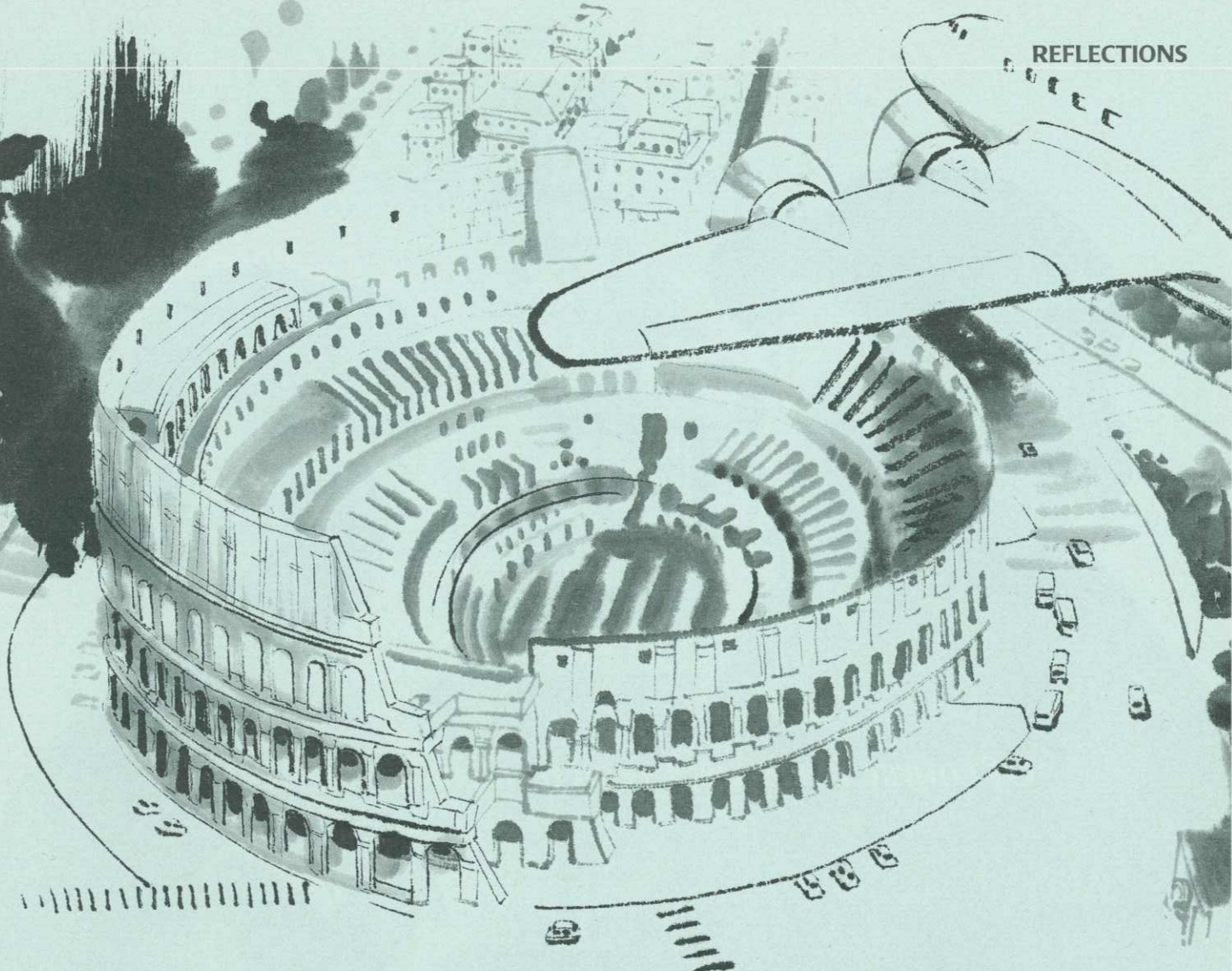
"So much! Is that cricket?" my companion asked.

"It's up to each of us. Take as much as you like," I retorted confidently. Then I noticed that the man next to me had not reached out but had simply told the waiter what he wanted.

## Western ways

It was a Western-style meal, but we were still in Asia, and there was nothing wrong with each person's being polite in his own way. In fact, I doubt if anyone would have minded if the oilman had pulled out a pair of chopsticks to eat with. After all, would the Japanese have been upset if an American wanted to eat sushi with a fork? Would the American have been uncomfortable at not using chopsticks?

In fact, we Japanese probably looked a little funny as we intently imitated Western manners rather than relying on our own good sense. Yet this is a pattern that persists even today, with Japanese



unconsciously assuming that they have to adapt to Western ways and not expecting Westerners to make any reciprocal adaptation.

Well into my journey, we came to a parting of the ways as the oilman and the electrical engineer said goodbye to catch a connection to their destination. My last ties with Japan were gone.

It was a long flight, and the tall foreigner next to me finally asked in halting English, "You go Roma?" Perhaps it was boredom that had kept him silent until then. Perhaps it was an unwillingness to interrupt our Japanese chatter. At any rate, I learned that he was an Italian sailor who had disembarked in Yokohama and was on his way home. Eagerly I told him that I was doing the reverse—I had left home and was going to Rome.

In later years, I frequently got frantic notes from distant relatives and friends of friends saying they would be arriving in Rome at such and such a time and could I

meet them at the airport and show them around. When I went, there was no one to meet me at the airport, and my experience was the better for it.

I have traveled all over for decades, and it has been my experience that you are safe anywhere—industrial country or developing country—so long as you are in good health, have a modicum of money, and are careful. This is axiomatic for the near-nomadic people of Europe and America, but not for Japanese. Japan does not have any immediate next-door neighbors accessible by land, and each Japanese who leaves these sheltered shores does so with a great feeling of adventure and trepidation.

With lots of gestures on both sides, the Italian sailor and I talked. It was clear that he had never studied English, but Italian and English are both Romance languages and he had picked a little up in his travels. After much trial and error, I finally figured out that he had bought a transistor

radio in Japan and wanted me to take it through customs for him. "Change. You carry. Help. Please."

Probably because I was secretly hoping that he would help me make my way in Rome despite my not speaking a word of Italian, I agreed. Yet no sooner were we safely through customs than he took the radio back and said adieu. Only after much insisting did I get him to help me change my pittance in dollars to a pittance in lira. Then he was off.

Alone in a strange land. Never have I felt lonelier. ■

(This is the fourth of five essays by Takao Okamura.)

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