

Locals Love EC Festivals

By Shintaro Kishigami

It happened in 1982, in slightly more than a week between May 20 and 28. In Hachioji City, on the western outskirts of Tokyo, Hachioji EC Week was held. It was the first of a kind in Japan—Japan's first "EC Week." To say the "western outskirts" or "west end" seems inappropriate now. The Hachioji region, today known as the "big west" and led by the initiatives of the Hachioji Chamber of Commerce and Industry, is on its way to becoming the hub of economic and cultural advancement in the metropolitan Tama area.

The name "big west" evokes American history and the atmosphere of dreams and romance surrounding development of the U.S. West. The fighting spirit of the people of Hachioji is especially laudable and deserving of success. I feel we owe them a great debt. The initiative of citizens of Hachioji from all walks of life, who approached us with the idea of an EC Week and established an event that provides direct links between Japan and the EC at a regional level, is something I will never forget.

Levels of contact

Gilles Anouil, then Press and Information Counselor at the Delegation of the EC Commission in Tokyo, wrote at the time, "Relations between countries are not just a matter of exchanges between presidents, prime ministers and other VIPs. On the contrary, contacts cannot be limited to just VIP exchanges. Initial top-level contacts must be followed up at the ordinary people's level and must have their support."

As Anouil says, for international exchanges to actually bear fruit, friendship and goodwill must come down to ordinary people and be promoted at the grass roots level. In reality, however, this style of exchange, seeking to transform the results of top-level meetings into concrete action by ordinary citizens, still has a long way to go.

Might not a great deal be achieved, in terms of warmer and deeper relations, by taking the reverse approach, and allowing contacts that had their beginning at the grass roots level, in exchanges between individuals and individuals, villages and villages, cities and cities, regions and regions, to gradually develop and grow to a national scale? "International relations" in the broad sense tends to imply a certain amount of position-taking, whereas in reality the actual contacts all involve human communication, between individuals of flesh and blood.

The meeting that took place between the EC and Japanese regional society in Hachioji arose completely by chance. Chuo University, which had relocated its campus to the outskirts of Hachioji from central Tokyo, wanted to make some contribution to the local community and approached the EC Delegation in Tokyo to see if there was some project that we could jointly undertake.

This was the initial stimulus, but rather than do something only within the confines of the university, it was decided, literally, to "throw away books and go into the town." Without going into details of the planning that lay behind it, the result was the Hachioji EC Week idea, into

which the whole town—city authorities, city council, senior and junior chambers of commerce and the full range of women's associations—taking on "European colors," threw its support.

We at the EC Delegation wanted to extend further the valuable experience we had gained in our direct relationship with the citizens of Hachioji. Kyoto was next, then Morioka, Yamagata, Oita, Sapporo, Ishikawa, Takamatsu, Gifu, Nagano, Fukui, Kumamoto, Aizu-wakamatsu and Osaka. All these have held their respective "EC Weeks," and whether regions or cities, their different names reflect the different histories and individual local color of each.

Japanese officials in the EC Delegation including myself act merely as organizers responsible for particular projects, while as a rule large numbers of European businesspeople and European women resident in Japan attend the various regional events. These are people who speak and understand a fair bit of Japanese and are chosen for their ability to communicate.

Most of them are residents in Tokyo and seem delighted to be given the chance to visit provincial cities. In some places, on the streets and in the parks, local children still surround them at a



Aizu EC Association Commemorative Parade. The associations have grown out of the success of the EC Weeks, which have been greeted enthusiastically by local residents from children to old folks.

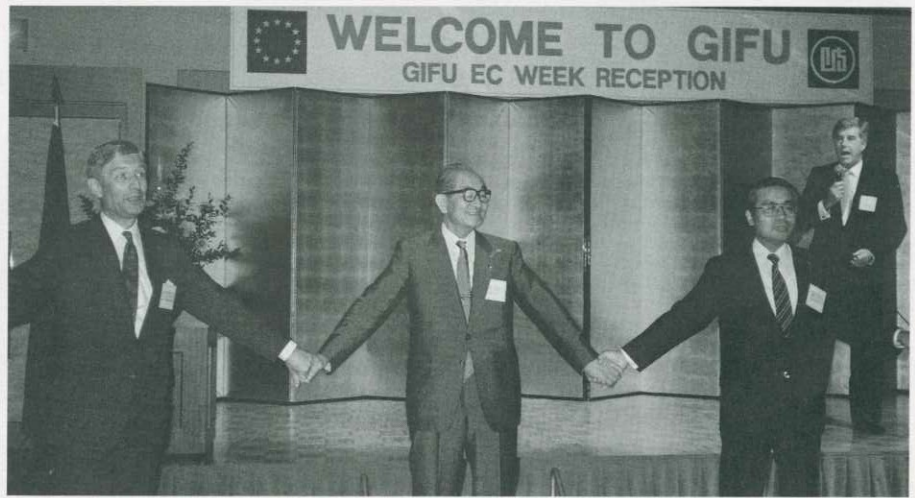
distance, pointing at them in wonder and saying "Gaijin (foreigners)!"—something that would almost never happen among residents of major Japanese cities today. But once the children have a reason to come in contact with the visitors, they quickly become friends. They cluster around the European participants, and before long even the old women basking in the sun wander over and reveal their curiosity by asking questions like, "What's the EC?"

Mixture of activities

Often these questions are in different local accents and dialects, and there were European participants in Fukui EC Week two years ago who picked up a local Fukui accent that still colors their Japanese speech today. In Japan it has been said since olden times that "Dialects are the regions' bill of passage." And from Hokkaido in the north to Kumamoto in the south, one of the pleasures of participating in the various EC Weeks has been to come into contact with the particular cultural traditions and local accents of each place.

Going back for a moment to the Hachioji EC Week, the formula developed for that event has largely become established as the pattern for all similar events. It involves a mixture of "hard" and "soft" activities. The former include lectures and symposia on subjects such as "Japan-EC Relations," "The Current State of EC Unification," "Advice on Japanese Internationalization" and "Promotion of Mutual Investment between Europe and Japan." The latter comprise activities such as a European film festival, performances of European music, demonstrations of European cooking, an essay contest and a homestay program.

Stretching over four to five days, or seven to eight days, a packed schedule of events leads steadily to the achievement of the EC Week's anticipated goals. Throughout my long career in public relations, I believe I have come to understand something of the mysteries of the public relations field. And I can assure you that it is not the right approach to simply choose a target and drench him with as



A reception held during the EC Week in Gifu, Western Japan. Their success has been helped by the enthusiastic support of European residents and businesspeople in Japan.

much information as possible (otherwise known as "brainwashing").

To think you can simply pour a bucket of water over someone's head is not only bad policy but almost a form of violence. It not only strengthens the resistance, but fails to get your message across. The approach I prefer is this: to have the person walk through deep forest in the morning mist in a beautiful place. During his stroll, he is surrounded by invisibly fine particles of mist. By the time he reaches the exit from the forest he will probably notice that he is drenched. But it will have been a pleasant experience for him.

In the little story above, the bucket of water thrown over the person's head is what we seem to see so often in cases of trade friction, investment friction and similar major conflicts on which each country's national interests hinge. This is especially true in the spectacle of fighting between Japan and the United States, where names are being called and swords brandished not just at a government level but recently among intellectuals and academic circles as well.

Soft particles of mist on the forest path. These symbolize the feelings of individual citizens at a grass roots level. At the opening of the Morioka EC Week, Festival Chairman Kichinoemon Kuji, president of the Morioka-based *Iwate Nippo* (daily news), made a pertinent remark. He said, "The walls of the heart cannot

easily be climbed. But although it may take time, with perseverance and effort, mutual understanding can be ultimately achieved."

The feelings of the EC do seem to have been understood at a regional level in Japan. Each EC Week held so far has been evaluated a great success, both by the EC and the local Japanese community. This has led to another significant development: the establishment of an "EC Association" in 12 different areas throughout Japan, each bearing the name of the specific region or city. Originating in Yamagata Prefecture, the idea was first taken up by Oita Prefecture, which in fact established the first EC Association in Japan.

After holding such a successful and enjoyable EC Week, it would be a pity to see it end as just a passing event, local representatives said. They wanted to set up a permanent organization within the region, with the cooperation of the EC Delegation in Tokyo, to act as a bridge between Japan and Europe. Internationalization of regional areas is also becoming a serious issue now in Japan. This could even be described as a rare case of mutual motivation, unerringly matched. The fine mist of people's grass roots feelings can be seen, shining brightly ahead. ■

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