

Part 2 – Travels in Japan

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Introduction

Here's the second installment of my travels in Japan. I've really enjoyed putting it together. It's much much shorter than Part 1 and the writing comes from my journal entries and reflects my thoughts, interests, and impressions of Japan. I hope you enjoy it as much as I've enjoyed putting it together.

Japan – A refreshing change

Living in Japan has shown me that there is another way to live life and for a society to organize itself in order to achieve social harmony. Even though Japan has embraced Western ways (they value punctuality and meeting deadlines as much as North Americans and Westerners do) and technology, it still clings to the old ways. If the Japanese have opinions, I've discovered, they, for the most part, keep them to themselves, as they do not wish to offend the other. When they enter or leave a room, they excuse themselves. Deference is shown to the elderly and to persons in authority.

The art of observation has taught me what is appropriate to say and do in many social situations such as how to thank someone, apologize (used as a social lubricator), and to make a request. You dare not enter someone's home or a school or some restaurants without taking off your shoes and exchanging them for a pair of slippers. In Japan, the exchange of business cards (meishi) forms an important part of the introduction of two parties. The business card is an extension of the person giving it and is treated with the utmost respect. Articles are always received with both hands.

Japan and its citizens continue to amaze me. Here's a poem that I copied from the War Museum on the Japanese spirit during my visit on 17.4.1.

if one asks about
the Yamato spirit
of these islands
it is like the cherry
blossoms
that bloom in the morning sun
By Motoori Norinaga

Japan has initiated some wonderful social programs; one of them is the national school lunch program, which has been operating for just over 50 years. The lunch program runs like clockwork, which I can personally attest to. The food along with the china, trays and cutlery is delivered each school day in the morning. The students themselves take charge of serving the food and the cleaning up afterwards. As the desks are used for eating, it's considered rude to sit on them, a faux pas many new English language teachers make here. I've discovered that the school lunch program teaches school children social skills as they are all involved in some aspect of serving the lunch and the clean up afterwards. It also provides and teaches them about good nutrition. No child goes hungry in Japan. Foreign governments can take a lesson from Japan's successful school lunch program.

Something I found comforting about living in Japan is that if I couldn't find an address, I could always drop in at a police kiosk (koban) and ask for directions. There was even an occasion when a police officer approached me inquiring if I needed some assistance. In that instance, I was studying a city map outside a Tokyo subway station trying to situate myself and figure out how to get somewhere from there, when I was asked if I needed assistance. I've also found that the Japanese Railway (JR) system runs on a dime and one could approach JR personnel for assistance since many of them speak some English. Subway attendants are also helpful and were glad to have the opportunity to practice their English skills with a foreigner.

Whenever I attended a Japanese *Matsuri* (festival), I was amazed at how adept the Japanese are in preparing Japanese foods (okonomiyaki, takuyaki, yakisoba) in very tiny food stands. The Taiwanese had the same knack and were also as wonderfully adept in preparing meals in very tiny spaces too. Japan was also an adventure in eating. My favourite restaurant was the conveyor belt (Kaitenzushi) sushi places. Sushi and sashimi could be had at an affordable 100 Yen a dish (usually two pieces of sushi). It was an enjoyable experience. While sitting at a counter, the conveyor belt would come along parading dozens of dishes of sushi. If you liked something, all you had to do was reach over and help yourself to the dish. When you finished your meal, you rang a bell and one of staff would come along and tally up the empty dishes and hand you a bill. They also served great miso soup! Also, many restaurants display plastic copies of the actual food dishes they serve, which makes ordering a cinch. You simply point at what you want to order. There were vending machines galore selling everything from rice to beer to cans of coffee available on most street corners. You could find practically everything and anything at 7/11 or Family Mart stores which were conveniently opened 24 hours seven days a week. I found I didn't need to cook as I could purchase an o-bento, a boxed meal, at any supermarket or convenience store.

Unfortunately, living in these two countries hasn't been good for my waist size. In all honesty, I don't mind being a big person!

One of my favourite places to while away a few hours was Mister Donuts, which is a national donut franchise. They are located everywhere in Japan as I can personally attest to. They serve yummy donuts with interesting fillings like red bean (anko) and have good coffee but they also serve delicious soups and ramen. One of my favourite donuts is the curry donut. It's a fried donut with a curry filling inside. It's to die for! Too bad it's not available in TO! A great thing about Mr. Donuts is that they don't charge for coffee refills. A real bonus!

Also, one needn't travel with one's luggage. One could avail themselves of Takuyubin, a national cartage service that would deliver your bags to your destination from anywhere in Japan. All you have to do was take your things to any establishment featuring the Takuyubin symbol (a mama cat with a kitten).

In Japan, one can rely on service. How wonderful! In Toronto, I would be hard pressed to find any customer service. In Japan, most sales staff greeted me with the famous *iraishai* (welcome) and was readily available to assist me even though I spoke very little Japanese. Also, prices for goods were clearly marked, which was something I appreciated.

Japan has shown me another way to live life for which I'm truly grateful!

More thoughts about Japan

Perhaps, it is another urban legend about Japan. Friends have asked me about it. I have read about it. It peppers the conversations of foreigners in Japan. Although I have come across vending machines selling everything from beer to rice, I haven't come across one selling teenage girls underpants.

The Japanese utilize space differently. They use it to its maximum. They make compact cars and appliances to fit tight living situations.

Maebashi

When I was living in Maebashi, I lived for a while in the Showa-machi district. Around the corner from my place was a small temple built beside a huge rock. I wondered how it got there since the land in and around Maebashi was flat. Then I read the folktale "The Flying Rock of Iwagami". The rock came from a volcanic eruption from Mt. Akagi a very long time ago. Masons thought of using it for their work and some poor sod tried to hack a piece off only to lose his life in the process. When he hit the rock, it bled. The stonemason died from fright and since then, no one has ever attempted to touch the rock again. The locals feared the rock thinking the rock god might bring evil upon them, so the locals built a small temple beside it to placate the rock god. Later on, foxes (*inari*) came to play near the temple, which are considered messengers of the Inari God. The temple was then named "The Flying Rock of Iwagami Inari".

My first apartment in Japan

My first place was approximately 8 by 10 feet. It was furnished with a narrow bed, a coffee table, and a sub-compact fridge. There was a built in closet, and a frosted glass sliding door that opened to a shared tiny courtyard area. When you entered the tiny apartment, the passageway leading to the room was fitted to the one side with a washing machine, a sink, a stove element and a few built in shelves. On the other side, was a door leading to the tiny washroom. This was my living space and somehow, I learned to manage to live in such a tiny space, which was a real accomplishment.

Japanese literature

I've enjoyed reading Japanese literature in particular the novels of Kawabata and Japanese folktales. My favourite Japanese folktale has to be Momotaro, The Little Peachling. It's the story of a boy found in a peach raised by an elderly childless couple. As a young man, Momotaro journeys to the Island of Ogres, where with the help of some animal friends, he defeats the Ogres and claims their riches. He returns victorious and takes care of his elderly parents in style. Urashima Taro comes in second place. I've discovered Japanese folktales are a link to Japan's past and reveal aspects of Japanese culture. They are a means to teach children morality and impart values. I learned that many adult Japanese could recite by heart the first line of Yasunari Kawabata's novel "Snow Country". Here's the line: The train came out of the long tunnel into the snow (in Edward Seidensticker's translation).

Japan – a magical kingdom

There is something magical about Japan. It is a land steeped in mythology; its royal family claims descent from the Sun Goddess, Amaterasu. The Emperor was revered as a living God until the former Emperor Hirohito repudiated his divine status. Shintoism, Japan's native religion, and Japan's cultural traditions (cherry blossom viewing) demonstrate a reverence for nature. Shinto shrines can be found at the base of mountains and in natural surroundings. Many Shinto shrines are built within groves of cedar trees. It is said that God resides in cedar trees. The Japanese are a people attuned to nature and the seasons, which remind me of Canada's first nations people who have the same reverence and respect for nature. They enjoy the changing of the seasons, which add a richness and texture to daily life that might otherwise seem or appear banal. I love autumn in Japan as it reminds me of the fall season in Toronto. In the midst of autumn, the leaves in the city turn into a riot of colour, which is quite pleasing to the eye. The cool, autumn air has a crispness and freshness to it that I quite enjoy. The days get shorter and the nights longer. And the light becomes softer and less harsh. Then, autumn gives way to winter, which blankets the city in icy cold weather.

Emperor Meiji

Under the benevolent Meiji Emperor, Japan went through rapid change and industrialization. One thing he did was to eliminate the caste system that had been part of the reign of Tokugawa shoguns. There was the aristocracy and then four distinct castes - the Samurai (warrior class) at the top, followed by farmers, then merchants and finally, artisans. There were also the untouchables, the Burakumin, the people of the hamlet, as they were referred to. They are/were considered unclean due to the nature of their dirty work such as butchering, working with leather, and cremation.

Monks, mice and cats

The thought came to me out of the blue - this unholy alliance between temple monks and cats. In times past, temple monks to protect their sutras from being eaten by mice and to prevent mice from getting into their storehouses of rice kept cats. The cat, I have learned, is considered an unholy being. The cat is said to have snubbed the Buddha. One legend has it that the cat had killed a mouse during one of his sermons. Did the monks ever consider the ethical implications of keeping cats? If they did, how did they handle them? It's an intriguing thought. Perhaps, I'll find out one day.

The alms bowl

I have written about panhandling, beggars and homelessness. I now turn my attention to the alms bowl, one of the few possessions belonging to a Buddhist monk, and having the purpose to collect food and/or alms. It is also a symbol, a symbol of the holy life. In Taiwan, I had come across many monks seeking alms. I remember one monk in particular who placed himself on one of the paths to Taipei Main Station. In the early morning sun, in his saffron coloured robes, sitting on the cement pavement in prayer, he was a brilliant sight and worthy of attention. In Japan, I have across very few mendicant monks and when I did I was surprised to find that their heads and faces were usually covered by a cone shaped hat that reached down to their chins.

I have learned that the alms bowl has a deep meaning and serves as a symbol and a reminder of a monk's renunciation of the secular life to pursue a holy life. Besides their robes and prayer beads, it is one of their very few possessions.

Alms bowls are usually hand made and fashioned from either clay or metal and not wood because wood splinters can cause food to lodge in the cracks, causing disease.

Monks usually present themselves in such a way as to be able to receive

offerings and rely on people who value and support what they do, their pursuit of a religious life.

Alan G. Watts

I've come across a wonderful explanation on the meaning of "hang-up" by renowned Zen monk Alan G. Watts, which I'd like to share with you. Here it is:

And another poem says of wild geese flying over a lake, "The wild geese do not intend to cast their reflection, and the water has no mind to retain their image." In other words this is to be – to put it very strictly into our modern idiom – this is to live without hang-ups the word "hang-up" being an almost exact translation of the Japanese bono and the Sanskrit Klesa, ordinarily translated 'worldly attachment'...

And the reflection of the moon on water is a metaphor for the attainment of enlightenment. The moon doesn't get wet nor is the water disturbed. And just as the moon does not rip the water apart, so enlightenment does not tear man apart.

Movies

I love movies. Bertolucci, Kurosawa, Hitchcock, Ozu, and Nagisa Oshima are some of my favourite film directors. In Japan, I stumbled on some interesting tidbits regarding Bertolucci's film *The Last Emperor* and Nagisa Oshima's film *In the Realm of the Senses*. For example, the character played by Japanese composer Ryuichi Sakamoto, in Bertolucci's film, *The Last Emperor*, was based on the Japanese national Ama Kasu, an infamous criminal. He was later to become the director of a film production company in Manchuria and engaged in intrigue. He committed suicide on August 20, 1945 to avoid capture by the invading Red Army. Nagisa Oshima's famous film, *In the Realm of the Senses*, was based on true events and retelling of the Sada story, a woman who cut off her dead lover's penis and kept it as keepsake.

Suicide

I have written about homelessness in Japan. Now, I turn my attention to another social problem that concerns me - suicide. I'm not accusing here. I'm recognizing. There's a big difference between the two.

In Toronto (where I am from), there are several organizations that offer confidential 24-hour telephone support to individuals who are in distress. These organizations also publicly advertise their services and do outreach. There are also several hotlines for people in distress – one for adults, one for women who have been sexually assaulted, one for children, and one for gay, lesbian, and bisexual youth.

I haven't come across any such services in Japan. I have looked around and haven't seen any public advertising about suicide prevention or a hotline number for individuals to call. I am bewildered given Japan's high suicide rate. I don't think hotline services exist at all. When I brought up the need for such a service, many of my Japanese friends told me that it was a good thing.

If there is such a service, I think many people don't know about it. If people knew about a confidential 24-hour anonymous telephone service, they would likely call in for help. Such a service I feel could work towards protecting human life.

Japan has a high rate of suicides like Canada but is unique in that there is a prevalence of group suicides of strangers who meet over the Internet and then plan out their suicides.

More thoughts on suicide

A friend who had been teaching English in South Korea told me that South Korea also has a high suicide rate. She spoke passionately about a young Korean man she knew who failing to secure employment upon graduation from university, committed suicide. She pointed out that there is limited space and opportunities in South Korea for people and little room for persons who don't make it or fit in. Suicide is a way out. It is the same in Japan. From my research, many Japanese suicide victims are middle-aged

unemployed men who escape through suicide rather than struggle with unemployment, economic uncertainty, and loss of face. How terribly sad!

Tokugawa Shogunate

Underlining Japan's economic success is its social cohesiveness, which has evolved over the centuries. It crystallized under the Tokugawa Shogunate who imposed the caste system and officially isolated Japan from the world to keep out any foreign influences from reaching the Japanese. He was all about law and order. Although at first openly accepting of Christianity, he later reneged on his position and began to persecute Japanese Christians relentlessly. Christianity posed a threat to his authority. He wanted to remain top dog. Christianity subscribes and answers to a higher order and he perceived the faith commitment of Japanese Christians as a direct challenge to his authority and government. By 1581, it was reported that 150,000 Japanese had been converted to Christianity.

Acting on his fears, he began a campaign of religious persecution, which continued throughout the Tokugawa Shogunate. Although successful in creating social order, he wasn't successful in wiping out Christianity. What he succeeded in doing was to drive Christianity underground, which re-emerged centuries later under the Meiji period.

Shinjuku Station

Someone asked me if I have ever experienced a crowded subway in Tokyo where passengers would be squished in by gloved subway pushers.

I hadn't. Despite having lived near Shinjuku Station, one of the busiest train stations in the world, and having been a frequent user of the subway station during my short stay in Shinjuku. It might just happen yet.

Big-nosed foreigner

In Taiwan, some of my students and some of the locals sometimes called me a big-nosed foreigner and a fat pig. I think that some Taiwanese have no shame given that some would insult you to your face. In Japan, for some, I was a contemptible figure. However, I discovered that many Japanese love high noses so my large nose was a source of compliments. Unlike the Taiwanese, I've found that the Japanese would refrain from hurling insults. Many Japanese I met assumed that my favourite food was hamburger. Why do they stereotype? I've wondered about this. Some thought eating junk food was the cause of my bulk. They asked: "What's your favourite food?" Eagerly anticipating and hoping that I'd confirm their suspicions and say hamburger. I didn't.

The pleasure of living abroad

Have you ever experienced here for there? I have had such moments. There have been times when aspects of Japan have reminded me of Taiwan. Rice paddies in both countries are laid out with a draughtsman's skill and accuracy to detail. Taipei and Tokyo both have overcrowded districts, temples, shopping malls and masses of people moving about. Whenever I stepped out of my apartment, I would experience something new – the pleasure of living abroad.

The Japanese Tea Ceremony

In September of 2004, Sen Genshitsu, the 15th Ura Senke tea master, performed the tea ceremony in Mexico city's Metropolitan Cathedral, to commemorate the 50th anniversary of his introduction of tea ceremonies to Latin America. The Latin American group is called Tanko-tai. He performed the ceremony to promote world peace. What a lovely thing to do!

The ceremony was also offered up to St. Felipe, Mexico's first saint, and the patron saint of Mexico City. St. Felipe was persecuted and martyred in Nagasaki in 1597. The tea master hoped the ceremony would comfort the soul of the saint.

Here's an example of Japan at its best. Now, if other countries were to offer up their cultural traditions to promote peace, we might just make some inroads.

Public Pissing

Something about Japan that isn't cool is seeing Japanese men piss in public. What did I say? I said, "Japanese men pissing in public places isn't cool." It really happens and usually occurs under the cover of darkness. I have been witness to a few instances of this public display. It floored me. But there appears to be no shame for men to relieve themselves in public spaces. It's a privilege they enjoy. No one blinks an eye but perhaps for a gaijin if he or she notices it since it isn't something usually done back home. It is considered a public offence.

I have learned that Japanese men, when they need to pee, simply find a spot, anywhere will do, and piss. I had noticed they usually do it in a passage way or against some corner.

I have yet to do it and if I did, I would definitely be noticed. I could see someone making a complaint to the police or to my school. I would be hulled in, reprimanded and possibly charged with public indecency. There's a clause in my contract about being dismissed for moral turpitude and no doubt in the eyes of my employer this would be considered an act of moral turpitude and grounds for dismissal.

Photography

I love photography. Photography is more than a hobby for me. It's a passion. It records my impressions. I love traveling too. My camera authenticates my visits. It takes possession of what I have seen. It records. Photographs help me to remember where I have been, what I have seen, and what I have experienced.

Never underestimate the power of pictures. They can help cure homesickness. They can help you remember the things that are important

to you.

They can help you see how things once were.

Yayoi Kusama is one of my favourite Japanese photographers. I was fortunate to see some of her work on permanent exhibit at the Komagane Fine Art Museum. Another is Hitoma Ueno who is best known for his pictures of samurai.

The earliest known authenticated picture of a Japanese is of Sam Patch. He was rescued at sea in 1851 and brought to America. He was photographed by Baltimore photographer Harvey R. Marks (1821 – 1902). He returned to Japan with Commodore Perry on the black ships.

The Japanese in the early years thought that having a photograph taken would lead to illness or even death.

The Power of a Smile

Did you know that it takes fewer muscles to smile than to frown? Well, it does.

Recently, I bid my adieus to my adult EFL students. The course had come to an end and we were all going our separate ways. One of my adult students, a lovely young woman, told me before she left with tears flowing down her cheeks that she considered me to be a very encouraging and supportive teacher because I was always smiling in class. Her comment touched me. It was an affirmation of 'me'.

When I thought about it she was right. I would always break into a smile whenever any of my students were speaking up in class or answering questions correctly or speaking to each other in English. Actually, I think I just smile a lot. I prefer smiling to frowning. I suppose the tendency as one ages is to smile less and begin to wear a frown. Perhaps, some think frowning is a sign of maturity. Thank goodness it hasn't happened to me yet. I hope it never does. I don't want to become an old fart!

The Irises

The irises have caught my attention. They are in bloom and are cultivated in many of the Japanese gardens I walk pass on my way to work.

Purple irises were painted by Van Gogh. Perhaps, if he had seen them in the rainbow of colours that I have seen here, he might have been tempted to paint them in yellow, violet, pink, lavender or even white.

It's not only the irises but also the wildflowers growing freely along the mountain slopes that make my walks to work so enjoyable.

Living in a small town

Why have you come here?

I have come here to teach English as a foreign language.

Frogs I heard singing the other night as I made my way home to my new apartment. An outline of the Japanese Alps was visible in the darkness. Laughter from one of the izakiyas that dots the main strip greeted me as I walked pass. The odd car whizzed by. I am looking forward to spending time here.

My pad is irresistible. The interior is completely new and renovated. My closets are lined with cedar. There are new hard wood floors throughout the unit. The fixtures, the bathroom and the kitchen are also new. Lucky me.

It was quite a change from my former living accommodations in Shinjuku. I was sharing a gaijin apartment with two other flat mates, a young woman from Okinawa and a gent from the UK. My room was a freestanding six tatami addition on the rooftop of a three-storey building. It was unique and so too was my former landlady, a fascinating and quite accomplished individual and a former Baronessa.

Why have you come to Japan?

I have been asked this question numerous times by both Japanese and foreigners. As the question is asked of me so often, it begins to sound like a mantra. I tell them. A significant reason for coming to Japan was to experience the country as a resident and not as a tourist. Living as a resident gives one a different perspective on the order of things and provides opportunities for making friends and a richer experience than being a tourist.

What makes up my life here? It's my job, which slots me in the social hierarchy and gives me status albeit a lowly one. My job is my connection to Japanese society and without it I'd have no access.

The old Jinja in my small town

The other day I visited the old Jinja in the town. It's situated in a grove of trees and except for the sounds of nature it is a very tranquil and quiet place. There was no one else there and I had the place to myself and roamed about freely. Although it was a very hot day, here in the midst of a grove of trees it was refreshingly cool, so, I spent part of the afternoon sitting in the shadow of the Jinja contemplating the beauty of my surroundings.

On my way home, I ran into a very friendly woman and her son walking their lovely, little dog, an Akita. We greeted each other and initiated a conversation. She encouraged me to pet her dog, which I did. The dog was very sweet and loved to be caressed. Now, there's an Akita near me where I live that gave me no rest. He barks and howls at anyone or anything that walks or goes by his house. Even if he just got a glimpse of me he would start to howl. The little kids of the neighborhood just ignore him and pay him no attention. So, I've started to do this too and now his barking isn't so loud and ferocious. It's becoming more of a disgruntled growl.

This lovely woman told me how to prepare and cook Daikon, a large root vegetable. Her son was very shy. She prodded him to say something, which

he did. We exchanged basic greetings. His mother was happy to see him practice his English.

My little town

Walking and cycling about, I'm beginning to get a feel for my town and see that it is many little towns. There's a west and east side delineated by the railway tracks. Now, the east side resembles a sub-division back home. There are large chain stores dotted along the main road. Homes are built from brick and/or concrete and resemble some bungalows back home, which sit on a half-acre plot of land. There are sidewalks, traffic lights, two lane roads, and so on. It feels American in nature. There are still of course the rice fields and the miniature farms but I could see they were giving way to these new American styled homes.

Now, the west side resembles a typical Japanese town. Around the train station there is an abundance of restaurants, izakayas, and several business hotels clustered together. Except for the main road leading to the train station, the streets are narrow. It's a mixed bag with businesses intermingled with residential homes. Some of the homes are constructed from wood and corrugated iron sheets. There are some homes constructed in the Edo style. Yet, it's very typical in style to most towns and cities in Japan. Now, further up the mountain, we find again new sub-divisions where the Canadian log cabin style home is in fashion. Homes are set in wooden lots. They are quite beautiful.

It feels that a new town is being constructed around the old. A new way of living and being is unfolding. Of course, there are numerous malls and there are a few service areas by the highway up by the mountain. And throw into this mix bag are small apartment buildings, stores, banks, a post office, temples, and so on. There's no order it appears. And the town straddles the central and southern Alps giving it a majestic ambience. Of course, running through the town are brooks, streams, canals and cement water passageways, all leading to the river down below in the Ina Valley.

Wherever you are the sound of gurgling water can be heard. What a lovely thing to hear!

bits and pieces – my little town

On one of my evening walks, I came upon a ramen street vendor. He had parked his cooking van in a vacant parking lot on the main road. There was the characteristic red lantern with Kanji characters written on it. There was just one table and on it was a lit candle. He was sitting at the table when I spotted him from across the street. He was elderly man, slim of build and there from across the street he looked such a tragic figure. If I had been hungry which I wasn't, I would have stopped and ordered something. But also on that particular evening it was quite hot and humid that I couldn't eat anything steaming hot. But I thought perhaps next time I would order something. When I passed him by, I said good evening in Japanese but he didn't respond.

I noticed that the evening trains on JR Ida Line were always nearly empty of passengers. I would stop and watch them go by. Sometimes, I'd run into people walking their dogs. One evening I met a friendly dog called 'Green', the colour green. The owner, a middle-aged woman, was quite friendly. She said "American". "No", I said. "I'm from Canada." Then, I said, "What a nice dog." She said, "Green, his name Green". "Hello Green," I said. Green then comes over and smells my private parts. The owner, embarrassed yanks him away with the leash and walks off.

The other day when meeting Mr. Shiojiri at the grocery store he says to me "Wassup?" "Nothing much", I said. And then I added "Great line". He smiled at my compliment. He studies English in his free time and has been to America. His colleague, Mr. Matsumoto, whom I deal with at the store speaks English extremely well. Mr. Matsumoto tells me about the daily specials and translates the labeling on the products for me. He's a godsend. My eating habits have vastly improved thanks to his help. Today, he said, "You need to cook these frozen foods in a microwave. Do you have a microwave?" "Microwave? Oh, you mean microwave?" I said. "No, I don't", I said. I then added that a microphone is an object that amplifies the voice and mimicked the action. He laughed. "Yes, microwave", he said.

One afternoon I ran into my landlady with one of her teenage grandsons and stopped to chat. "Yes, it's a hot day today." I acknowledged. I then asked

them, “You have a pet cat? Dog?” I noticed an empty pet cage parked near their front entrance. “Neko”, the grandson said. “Where is it?” I said. “Around” he said gesturing with his hands. “I thought I heard meowing”, I mentioned. The grandmother corrected me and said “niow”. I laughed.

A shooting star

One evening on my evening walk, I saw a shooting star, albeit the tail end of one. I was elated. I looked up and there before me a glimpsed a shooting star in the night sky. How happy it made me feel. It brought me back to my childhood days when I would stay up late and scan the night skies looking for shooting stars to make wishes upon. I made a wish and do hope it comes true.

CHIUNE SUGIHARA

Helping others is important. Small acts of friendliness and/or gestures of friendship can mean a great deal to those less fortunate.

Brave individuals saved many lives due to small acts of assistance during the Second World War. Many Jews of Europe and other persecuted groups escaped death at the hands of the Nazis because of the kindness of others.

Chiune (Sempo) Sugihara, a Japanese diplomat posted to Lithuania in 1939, was one individual who risked his life, the lives of his immediate family, and his social position to help Jewish refugees escape Lithuania in.

He together with the assistance of his wife issued Japanese visas to thousands of Jewish refugees stranded in Lithuania and looking for a way out of their situation. From July 31 to August 28, 1940, for a period of 29 days, Mr. and Mrs. Sugihara sat for countless hours filling out visas by hand. They wrote over 300 visas a day something, which would normally be more than one month’s work for a consul. These visas made it possible for Jewish refugees to travel to Japan and escape the Nazi advance on Lithuania.

It is estimated that approximately over 40,000 people owe their lives to Mr. and Mrs. Sugihara.

The State of Israel, bestowing its highest honour, posthumously honored him for his humanitarian acts.