

Japanese Transportation and Me

Margrit Hatanaka

In May 1958, after the ship carrying me on a 36-day journey from Germany to Japan, docked in Yokohama harbour, I entered Customs clearance, where the officer stamped a big black ink mark on every piece of luggage. "No, not on my new white handbag!" I protested. But it was done instantly. "Customs clearance we learned from the Germans." he said.

Throughout my first summer in Japan, I used the white handbag with the huge black stamp. "Customs clearance they learned from the Germans." I explained to everybody who stared at it.

Coming from a small town in Germany, the first thing I had to counter in Tokyo, with her then 9 million inhabitants, was to deal with all sorts of urban conveyances, which included streetcars, buses, the JNR commuter trains and the two subway lines, the Ginza-sen and the recently-completed Marunouchi-sen, and which were for me altogether overwhelming.

At that time, there were no English signposts, all stations signs were written only in Japanese Kanji characters, and not being able to read them, I learned very soon to ask in Japanese, "Is this train going to Ikebukuro?" which was always answered "Yes, sir." or "No, sir." in very polite English.

Sometimes, when lost, I had to hop into a taxi, which then had the basic fare of ¥60 for the smaller one and ¥80 for the bigger one, while a bus ride was ¥15. The taxi drivers used to take me near my home, but did not enter the little street, because it was not asphalted. On rainy days, they stubbornly refused to drive through all those dirty puddles.

Thirty-seven years ago, one rarely saw foreigners riding Tokyo's transportation, and those few going by bus or train were all seen as Americans. Japanese students, who at that time seldom had been taught by native teachers, took the opportunity to practice their English with foreigners in trains. "May I speak to you in English?" was often the initial question of a conversation lesson during a train ride.

This didn't bother me. Being a student myself, and eager to learn everything about my guest country, I took the opportunity to ask, to inquire, to make friends, and also to improve my Japanese.

To meet people in trains is one of the most interesting and entertaining pleasures in my home country, sitting in a train compartment and chatting about one's journey and whereabouts.

One evening, on the Yamanote line on my way to Mejiro in a very crowded train, a tall elderly Japanese gentleman, clad in kimono, was standing in front of me, smiling at me in a most friendly manner, and I smiled back. Then he bowed a little, and asked in Japanese, "Are you German?" When I answered, yes I was, he said, "I thought so, because in your country, everybody is beautiful". This made me laugh out loud; nobody had ever told me that. The train stopped, and he was going to get off, when at the door he suddenly returned to my seat and shook my hand.

"Thank you." I said. Standing on the platform he waved until the moving train carried him out of sight. Every passenger around me was smiling now, and I felt myself comfortably integrated.

During my first 2 years as a student in Japan, I had many opportunities to travel all over the country, on excursions with fellow students mostly, on trips to Hokkaido and Kyushu and west Japan. Most adventurous were the trips to Karuizawa, when the steam engines in front as well as at the back of the train pulled and pushed us through the 40 tunnels up into the mountains, and our noses were black and filled with smoke.

Before 1964, the year of the Tokyo Olympic Games, the capital became one big construction site. The air was full of sand, everybody breathing it and patiently waiting for improved traffic facilities. Highways rose, and little streets became asphalted. Now taxi drivers could enter, even in the rainy season, without fear of being drowned.

And then the new shinkansen was built. I do not know exactly how many shinkansen there are in Japan now, but I do remember the many difficulties and problems discussed before building the first one, because nobody then really approved of building such a fast train. Even the children, imitating the sounds of the rattling trains "shu shu po po shu po po" in their songs, asked what they should sing for an electric 'blitz' that probably would not make a sound at all. (Later, when the shinkansen was running, they sang, "doo-aan, doo-aan.")



■ Taxis at Tokyo Central Station in the late 1950's

(Transportation News)

There was also a slogan in form of a little poem that ran,

**You small Japan
In such a hurry
Where are you going?**

In 1964, all Tokyo stations got signboards with alphabetic station names as well as the name of the next and previous station. No foreign visitor should get lost. Train officials, station masters, and all inhabitants of Tokyo were taught to look out for foreigners in need, and one could not stand quietly at any place without being approached by some polite person asking, "May I help you?" Unfortunately this ceased after the Olympic Games, and the alphabet quickly vanished.

Nowadays, every station in Tokyo has its name in alphabetic and Kanji characters, although subway stations still do not print alphabetic characters on their rail maps above the ticket vending machines. But there are now English signposts, gradually making the capital internationally oriented.

Over the years, as my Japanese improved, I became able to communicate. Being understood and able to understand, I could explain now to the ticket inspector, that I certainly had purchased a ticket for the Green Car, but had lost it. Later, I received a letter from him, telling me that my ticket had been found in the seat upholstery. How much would they have fined me in Germany for sitting without a ticket in First Class, I wondered. Lost things in Japanese trains, buses, taxis could always be found, sent back, or arranged to be fetched.

Once, a taxi driver, one hour after having driven me home was back standing in front of my door, holding a shopping bag with mandarin oranges, which he thought I had forgotten. I explained that they were not mine, but he made me take them anyway.

To communicate in Japanese with taxi drivers is mostly fun. After the obligatory first question "Where do you come from?" or "What is your home country?" taxi drivers easily find a topic to talk about. I have discussed the reunification of Germany as well as problems of the auto industry, differences in school systems as well as doing things the Japanese way. One taxi driver started to sing a German song in Japanese, I joined in in German, then the next one, and the next one. *Lorelei*, *Lindenbaum*, *Lullaby*, and songs by Mozart—he knew them all from his junior high school days. Arriving at my destination he refused to take any fare. "It was a pleasure for me," he said.



■ Riding the 'Shinkansen'

(Transportation Museum)

Communicating in Japanese also means taking advantage of the great service offered by railway officials. They care; of course, they also care for those, who do not speak or understand Japanese. I remember the guard running through all the cars looking for foreigners who had not understood the loudspeaker announcement that only the first three cars were going to Nikko. Every foreigner was asked kindly to move to one of the first three cars.

I also remember the reverse culture shock I experienced in my hometown in Germany, sitting on a bench on the platform and waiting for my train. At last, when nobody was waiting there anymore, the station master approached asking where I wanted to go. When I told him, he said that my train had already left, and on my protesting that no announcement at all had been made he simply asked, "Where do you come from?" "From Tokyo." I told him. I can never forget his pitiful look when he said, "You come from such a big city, and you cannot get into a train of this little town?" I restrained myself from explaining, that I had been waiting not only for my train, but also for the kind of service I was ac-

customed to.

Some years ago, there was a sudden blizzard in mid-April, and going from Zushi to Tokyo I was stranded in Ofuna. Hundreds of passengers were standing in freezing winds on the station platforms, while no trains were running, occupying all public telephones, then leaving one-by-one, in all directions, on foot, or being picked up by somebody. What should I do? At last, I took heart and went into the office of the station master, asking for help. All the railway officials were busy, running, and shouting, and making phone calls. However, although the situation was chaos, I was offered a seat next to the gas heater, served hot green tea, and the station master himself telephoned every hotel in Ofuna, asking for a room. Naturally, all were occupied by stranded people like me. At last, he led me to the cable car, which was still running to Enoshima, where I found a hotel room. Sitting there in a very hot Japanese bath I reflected upon finding friendliness in stormy weather.

In the future, there may be more traffic jams, more crowded trains and buses, and higher fares. But the service and care for passengers in Japan, I hope will never ever cease. ■



Margrit Hatanaka

Margrit Hatanaka obtained her doctorate in biology from Freiburg University in Germany before studying at Tokyo University on a Japanese Ministry of Education scholarship for 2 years from 1958. Since 1966, she has worked for the Language Department of the German Cultural Center; she has also taught German for JNR and JR for almost 20 years.