

Living in the Bermuda Triangle: Prague, Toronto, Nara

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The beginnings of interest in Japan in central Europe date back to the last decade of the nineteenth century when the Austrian count and diplomat Heinrich Coudenhove-Callergi married a trained geisha from an antique shop-owner's family by the name of Aoyama Mitsuko. When the couple returned to Vienna, Mitsuko became a countess and mistress of several castles in Austria and Bohemia, where the Coudenhoves spent a lot of their time. Her husband was a very liberal man who firmly believed in the idea of pan-Europeanism and educated his children in that spirit. All of their children were well-educated and spoke multiple languages; Mitsuko's second son, Richard Nikolaus, became the founder of the "Pan-Europa" movement after WWI. Mitsuko did her best to familiarize her noble friends with the basic facts of life in Japan.

The first Czech visitors to Japan were the two professional globetrotters, Josef Kořenský (1847–1938) and Enrico Stanko Vráz (1860–1932), who were both active around the turn of the century. Vráz visited Japan in 1896 during his voyage through eastern and southeastern Asia. The main purpose of his trip was to assemble a collection of artifacts for Prague museums. Kořenský's travelogues—e.g. *Travels in the World: Japan*—are still readable, because he describes things accurately in great detail.

One of the major contributions towards an accurate knowledge about Japan was Alois Svojsík's (1875–1917) *Japan and Its People*. Svojsík was a well-educated priest, and a chaplain at the well-known Holy Trinity Church in Prague. This devoted traveller not only visited Japan twice, but studied over a period of several years all the available Japan-related literature before publishing his major work.

Their successors were Jan Havlasa (1883–1964) and Joe Hloucha (1881–1957). Hloucha was the son of a beer brewer and studied economics and accounting. However, in 1908 he gave up his job with the Prague magistrate and became a full-time collector of art. He loved Japan from his early youth and wrote his most popular novel, *Sakura in the Storm*, at 24 before he even visited Japan. Havlasa was the son of a writer and wrote interesting "adventure novels." Several of them were about Japan, which he visited several times later.

An interesting though not well-known figure is Barbora Eliášová (1885–1957), the first woman traveller to the Orient. After her first trip she published a book called *A Year of Life among the Japanese and around the Globe* (1915). She was so enchanted by Japan that she returned right after WWI, intending to stay there longer. She lectured about the new state in the heart of Europe at Japanese schools, and wrote for Japanese journals. She also worked for the embassy of the newly founded Czechoslovak Republic. In 1923 she embarked on her third visit to Japan where she barely survived the devastating Great Kantō earthquake, losing all her possessions. After returning to Prague via Vancouver, she published a collection of Japanese fairy tales and a novel called *Hanako*.

Chinese and Japanese studies in Prague both got their start in the 1930s. Czech Sinology was established by eminent scholar Jaroslav Průšek (1906–1980) and Czech Japanology by his first wife Vlasta Hilská (1909–1968).¹ Průšek was well known in international scholarly circles and his book *My Sister China* was very popular in China itself. He is best known for his studies of folk storytelling in China. In his later years he committed three fatal “mistakes”: first, he supported China’s position in the China-Soviet border dispute; second, he supported the Prague Spring and Alexander Dubček; and third, he asked for a job at Harvard after a cycle of very successful lectures. Harvard did not take him on, but Ann Arbor would have welcomed him with open arms. However, he returned to “normalized” Prague and ended his life in disgrace. He was even banned from his beloved Oriental Institute, even though he was the founder.

Vlasta Hilská was my own teacher for five years, teaching Japanese classics, such as *The Pillow Book* by Sei Shōnagon, *Essays in Idleness* and *The Tale of Genji*. She translated a number of Japanese classical works, both poetry and prose as well as contemporary novels. Her *Verses Written on Water*, an excellent selection of *waka* poems, was first published in 1943 and became very popular. She was a leftist idealist of the First Republic and died, somewhat fortunately, in 1968, a few months before the Soviet tanks rolled into Prague and could shatter her socialist dreams.

In 1961 I finally made it to university after eight or nine years of odd jobs with the

1 Professor Vlasta Hilská (1909–1968) was the Head of Japanology at Charles University. She taught classical Japanese literature and we read *The Pillow Book*, *The Tale of Genji*, etc. in her interesting seminars. She translated a number of masterpieces of Japanese literature, both classical and modern, into Czech. As a member of the Communist party she tried to shelter her beloved department from political pressures. She died a few months before the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia.

help of a lawyer and family friend; I was very lucky to have the unstinting support of my wife and my parents. Many of my friends from high school had already started families and had decent jobs, so it would not have occurred to them to embark upon university studies so late in the game.

So one spring morning I came to take the entrance exam at the Faculty of Philosophy at Charles University and went directly to the Department of Russian, my wife Eva and I thinking that I would have the best chance of getting accepted there. The professor who interviewed me questioned me about my knowledge of classical Russian literature which I knew fairly well, then we switched to less orthodox writers such as Isaac Babel or Anna Akhmatova, Boris Pasternak and such, and we understood each other quite well. The great thaw in Prague cultural life was just beginning then. Perhaps I mentioned my translations of American literature (Ray Bradbury and others), because the professor suddenly asked: “Are you sure you want to study Russian literature? What if I take you upstairs to the English department?”

And so I ended up in the study of Professor Vančura, Head of the English Department. I think his assistant Professor Květa Maryšková was also present. They asked me to read an older text which contained words like “hilarious,” words that I did not know at the time. Even so, when I translated the text, Professor Vančura asked: “Your English isn’t bad. Wouldn’t you like to study another difficult language along with it?” So I asked: “And what could you offer me?” “We have Arabic, Persian, Tamil, Swahili, Chinese, Korean ...” It was not until almost at the very end he mentioned Japanese, and I said: “That’s it, I’ll take that.” I was reading *The Tale of Genji* and Bashō in English translation at the time, so I had a general idea about Japanese literature and I liked it a lot.

Of course the Japanese are not satisfied by this answer, so I give them a shorter, more emotional one about a karmic connection from a previous life. In 1972 I travelled in Western Japan on my bike and somewhere near the Great Shrine of Izumo I came upon a small rounded village of wooden cottages (*minka*). It looked like a Southern Bohemian village and from its high-pitched shingled roofs the smoke of afternoon baths was rising. In front of one of the cottages sat a white-haired granny who gave me a lovely smile and I was flooded by a feeling, almost a certainty that I knew this village for I must have lived here at some time in the past. The grandma probably felt something too, because she invited me into her cottage and put me up for a few days. Every time she was warming up the afternoon bath, she chuckled and said: “This is Goemon’s bath...” Goemon was

a famous Japanese criminal whom they boiled alive in a bath. A year later I sat with the writer Ibuse Masuji 井伏鱒二 in a small pub in Shinjuku when a fairly drunk editor of a large publishing house came over to our table and said: “Master, how can this foreigner understand the beauty of your writing?” Ibuse looked at him severely and replied: “This man isn’t a foreigner, he is a Japanese from olden times.” He confirmed what I felt in the Izumo village.

Professor Vančura said at the end of the interview: “You are handing in an application for extramural study while working, but this particular combination of English and Japanese is very demanding, so you’ll have to enroll as a regular full-time student.” I asked for one hour to think it over, went out into the street and from the nearest phone booth I called Eva at the hospital where she worked. She did not hesitate for a moment and said: “Take it, we’ll manage somehow.” I owe her a great deal, but this was one of the crucial moments in life when one can win everything and also lose everything. I will never forget that.

I was twenty-nine years old and from the very beginning of my studies it was crystal clear to me that from the steamer I had to board that I saw just a thin ribbon of smoke on the horizon. So I worked very hard and after a year asked my professor of Japanese if I could switch English to a minor and Japanese to my major. He said OK.

The five years of study went by rather quickly and in 1965, the fourth year of my studies, my grandma Hildegarda Pošík celebrated her 89th birthday and the whole extended family attended her festive lunch, including my favourite uncle Ivan Záhorský. At that point I was just completing my studies at Charles University and thinking about a trip to Japan. So when Uncle Ivan asked what I intended to do, I said I wanted to spend some time in Japan. It must have sounded like a wonderful joke, because everybody started to laugh, as if a small child had said: “I’ll be flying to Mars.”

I was lucky as that very summer Mr. Ikeda Tsuneo 池田恒雄, the Tokyo publisher of an extremely popular journal called *Baseball Magazine*, came to Prague on business. Together with my friend Ivan Krouský we interpreted for him and he fell in love with Czech art. He immediately came up with the idea to publish several monographs about Czech gothic and baroque painting and later invested so much money into this project that his company almost went bankrupt. He promised me that if I came to Tokyo he would help me in any way he could.

One summer morning I went to meet Mr. Ikeda at the Alcron Hotel and while I was waiting for him I chatted with his daughter, Miyoko, who accompanied him and was about sixteen at the time. I happened to be reading a lot of Japanese war stories, preparing for my dissertation. They were quite rough and full of military slang that was difficult to understand for a beginner. As chance would have it, one of the words I asked her about was *kintama*, or testicles, balls. When she heard the terrible word, the girl turned deep red and stared at the ground. Later this story became a favourite yarn of the Ikeda family and they told it in their circle of friends. I had no idea at the time that after some years I would introduce my best Japanese friend Tsuruta Kinya 鶴田欣也 to the Ikeda family and that he would fall in love with this shy teenager and leave his wife and three children for her. I had even less of an idea that this modest *yamato nadeshiko* would one day become a bestselling author called Kudō Miyoko 工藤美代子² and in turn will leave my friend. Her father died in 2002 and was inducted into the Japanese Baseball Hall of Fame. I will always fondly remember him, for he looked after me as if I were his own son.

And so it came about that after graduation in June I worked for a few months at the Oriental Institute and then in late August made it to Japan. After a week of plodding along through Russia—from Vnukovo Airport to Domodedovo, a long and uncomfortable flight to Chabarovsk, and from there a night train to the small Nachodka Harbour on the Pacific Coast, so that we would not see Russian cruisers in the Port of Vladivostok—after two or three days the Russian ship finally made it to Yokohama. I was truly relieved when I saw the red star on its bow for the last time.

In the harbour waited Mr. Ikeda and his limousine and in the welcoming group there was also my friend and fellow student Vlasta Čiháková, who had been in Japan for some time. After the journey through grim Russia I felt like Alice in Wonderland the first night—a comfortable little room in a modern hotel, and on the numerous channels of colour TV a language which so far was just a dreamland fantasy, but I could already follow a good deal of it.

2 Kudō Miyoko is a non-fiction writer of semi-documentary and documentary books and articles, some about Westerners who played an important role in Japanese life, such as E. Herbert Norman, a Canadian diplomat and historian, and Lafcadio Hearn (*In the Middle of a Dream: A Life of Lafcadio Hearn*). She also wrote a controversial book called *The Great Kantō Earthquake and the Truth about the "Korean Massacre"* (*Kantō daishinsai: "Chōsenjin gyakusatsu" no shinjitsu*).

In the summer of 1967, after a fruitful year in Tokyo, my uncle Vlad (who had fled the communist regime back in 1948), discovered an announcement in a Canadian staff bulletin that the University of Toronto was looking to fill a position in the newly formed Department of East Asian Studies; I wrote to them and was accepted for one year as a visiting assistant professor. Our departure from Japan went smoothly on the whole, except that I got a bad flu from running around too much to express my thanks to all the people who helped me during my stay. On 6 September 1967, we arrived from Tokyo's Haneda Airport at Vancouver and right after disembarking we were stunned by the magnificent wreath of snowed-in mountains on the horizon. We found accommodation for a few days at the comfortable Sylvia Hotel, a significant historical monument on Pendrell Street, dating back to 1912—very recent by our Czech standards, but ancient according to Canadian ones—just steps away from one of Vancouver's greatest ocean-side attractions: Stanley Park. I had no idea at the time that in my older years I would move into this street and live by the park on Pendrell Street.

Right after our arrival in Toronto I dove headlong into the academic life. The University was like a gentleman's club at the time, its president a distinguished scholar of English literature by the name of Claude Bissell. Our newly founded department had very few students, but my colleagues organized so called staff seminars where in fact we lectured to them and some visitors from Japan. That fall we had as guest professor Saeki Shōichi 佐伯彰一 from Tokyo University, who was a leading expert on American and European literature, but he was also very knowledgeable about Japanese literature. To teach a man of his knowledge anything at all was out of the question; all I could do was to survive with honor and avoid too much embarrassment. Saeki was a true scholar, but not a dry-as-dust one, and recalled during his lectures highly entertaining personal memories. For example after the war he met William Faulkner who sent him through the American embassy an essay called *To the Youth of Japan* in which the great writer speaks about the Japanese disaster and despair in the recently concluded war. To Saeki's great surprise Faulkner compared its meaning to the defeat of his own homeland, the American South. He said that just like Japan, the American South experienced the same defeat and although he did not spell it out he suggested that they were defeated by the same enemy: the Yankees.

It was clear what he meant when he said: "The intruders devastated our homes, our gardens, our farms..." He then added that the American South suffered from a longer and

more cruel occupation than Japan. Professor Saeki also told us an interesting story about his first trip to the United States where he was invited to give lectures at a prestigious American university. When he was passing through customs he got a form with various questions at the immigration gate, including “What is your religion?” Saeki truthfully replied “Shinto,” but the immigration officer read it and said: “Such a religion doesn’t exist, you must write something we have here.” Saeki refused that and finally was allowed to write “Shinto” into the space marked “Other.” How sad that the oldest and perhaps the most honest religion in the world is not designated on official documents.

Saeki offered me the first key to a critical understanding of Ibusu’s greatest novel *Black Rain*, which he evaluated as follows about a year earlier:

Ibusu Masuji took a stance of a very reserved, ordinary observer to these shocking and extraordinary events. He is an observer whom nothing will upset: he records the smallest details such as what people had for lunch, how they raise fish in Hiroshima’s countryside, seasonal ceremonies and festivities like *matsuri* in farming villages. It is an almost incredible triumph. Perhaps it’s the very essence of Japan.

At the time I was just beginning my research work on Ibusu Masuji, Saeki helped me a lot with his infallible critical judgment; I would even venture to say that he opened my eyes as to how one should approach this writer correctly. I must say that my view of Japanese literature was slightly biased from Prague towards so-called proletarian literature which our teachers (with the exception of Dr. Novák) viewed as the very pinnacle of modern Japanese writing. Here I met with the opinion held not only by Professor Saeki, but also Professor Tsuruta, namely that these leftist artists are second, or third rate writers, whose class awareness is perfect, but their artistic value negligible. Still, I would say from today’s perspective that Kobayashi Takiji’s novel *The Crab Cannery Ship* (1926), nicely translated by my Professor Hilská is not bad, since it portrays the inhuman conditions under which the Japanese crab fishermen had to fight for their livelihood. Kobayashi raised the level of proletarian writing, instead of trite ideological twaddle he mastered the art of artistic shorthand, dynamic plot and the technique of reportage.

I have researched the immediate postwar period in Japan in detail and collected a lot of articles and studies about influential literary groupings, including *Modern Literature*, *Postwar Literature*, and an important discussion called “Polemic about Second-Rate Art.”

In the spirit of postwar democracy—often just a superficial imitation of America—an opinion prevailed in critical circles that the majority of older artistic genres and disciplines are for the birds. Haiku is an outdated, old-fashioned and ossified form, unable to express the complex feelings of modern man, while Noh plays are in fact an aristocratic pastime, not understandable to the common people and of no benefit to it. Other popular polemics took place in the turbulent postwar period, for example, “Polemic about Subjectivity,” “Polemic about War Responsibility,” “Polemic about Apostasy,” and others. These were mainly reactions to the war defeat and thoughts about the belated development of Japan and political responsibility. Thanks to my dissertation I also had a fair idea about the Second World War, yet I had to prepare my weekly seminar called “Postwar Japanese Literature” very carefully for a whole week. It often happened that my wife woke up and asked: “You are up already?” And I answered: “No, I didn’t go to bed yet.”

I still remember those long nights and days of backbreaking toil, but I felt in my bones that I must make it in this new environment no matter what. Never in my life did I work as hard as in that first year in Toronto, but I was 35 years old, had a lot of energy, and enjoyed the work. Among the guests of my seminar was Makoto Ueda, an outstanding expert on classical and modern Japanese literature, especially the poetic tradition of haiku. Later he became famous for his studies of Bashō and books on the poetics of modern Japanese prose, for example, *Bashō and His Interpreters*, *Modern Japanese Poets and the Nature of Literature* and *The Mother of Dreams and Other Short Stories: Portrayals of Women in Modern Japanese Fiction*. I think I earned Ueda’s respect with a lecture on Mishima aesthetics, where I developed a theory that Mishima only seems to be a sworn romantic, but he is essentially not capable of truly romantic passion and his writing is by and large a cool intellectual construction. At that point he had not yet completed his massive final tetralogy *The Sea of Fertility*, the last volume of which (*The Decay of the Angel*) came out only after his suicide in 1970, but even that is fairly schematic and à la these to my taste. I still have the piles of notebooks in which I wrote down these lectures and numerous quotes from Japanese sources.

Next to a group of American draft dodgers we had very few Canadian students in our starting years and they were mostly talented adepts of literature who wanted to expand their horizon, or second and third generation Japanese who were trying to get acquainted with their cultural heritage. I remember a thoughtful and extremely well-read young man from the Maritimes, John Steffler, who wrote a brilliant essay on *The Tale of Genji* for my class. It was in fact so good that Ken Tsuruta (Kinya) included it in one of his

critical volumes. John had an unusual literary gift and so I am not surprised that he later received the Governor General's Award for his novel and in 2006 became Poet Laureate of the Canadian Parliament.

Among my Japanese students there was also an inconspicuous, modest girl by the name of Kerri Sakamoto, who once shyly handed me a short story about a third generation Japanese woman who looks in the mirror and asks in desperation: "Who is this?" The story was so good that I encouraged Kerri the best way I could and she fortunately listened to me. Today she is one of Canada's most promising writers.

After a year in Canada, on the morning of 21 August 1968, around ten o'clock in the morning we were staying as guests in our Czech friends' cabin on Christian Island (an Indian reservation) when I went shopping across the bay on the Štástný's motor boat. While I was choosing my potatoes, veggies and fruit, the owner of the grocery shop, an Indian lady, said: "Aren't you people Czech? You better look at that newspaper!" I looked and saw Toronto's *Globe and Mail* with large red titles that I had never seen before: "RUSSIAN ARMY INVADES PRAGUE." I looked at the article and asked the owner, "You better give me a bottle of whisky too, we're gonna need it!"

Before we returned to Toronto in early September, my wife and I agreed not to go back to occupied Prague. The first day at the university I went to see Professor Ueda and asked him if there was a permanent post at the Department of East Asian Studies for me. I will never forget Ueda's answer: "I think for a man of your caliber there will be." Ken Tsuruta later told me that a meeting was called about my possible job and the chairman of the department, a man by the name of Anthony Warder, dismissed the proposal with: "We don't need a Communist here." Warder was a somewhat puffed up Englishman who pretended to be aristocracy and did not know me at all. Ken talked him out of it, because he already knew my life story and was well aware of my hatred for Communism.

Shortly after the "entrance of the armies" (invasion or occupation were taboo words) the mass emigration of Czechs began. Canada behaved in a truly cavalier way, because it gave the newcomers free housing, decent pocket money and free language courses. A number of Czech academics also came to the University of Toronto and some of them became associate professors, even full professors on the spot. Quite a few never abandoned orthodox Marxism even in their new country and I found it a little funny that while I had to start at the lowest rung of the academic ladder, the authors of a regime that prevented me from study were immediately given the highest position since they had longer work

experience, and titles such as Candidate of Science, etc. We could not explain this to our Canadian friends; they simply did not understand, just as they did not understand that someone who was sentenced to three years in jail did not really commit any crime.

In the career of an academic it is not important how many nitpickers—my friend Wayne Schlepp calls them accurately *Fehlerschnüffeller* or “error sniffers”—throw spanners in his works, but how many genuinely great people influence his life. The greatest figure of Japanese Studies in Prague and the man who gave me most is and forever will be Dr. Miroslav Novák. As Karel Fiala wrote in his obituary, though Novák did not lay the cornerstone of the Japanology building, he built the most important and finest parts of its structure. One of my oldest memories of him that comes up in my mind as if it were yesterday is the day when we stood by the window in Celetná Street towards the end of my first year of studying Japanese and I asked: “Dr. Novák, will you stand behind me if I apply for a change of English to Japanese as my major?” Without hesitating one moment he replied: “I will.” I respect Dr. Novák so much that this was a lifetime commitment. I hope I fulfilled it with honour. Novák had a gift that few people have: a rare combination of exact linguistic thinking and a great artistic imagination. My critics sometimes object to switching from subject to subject, a free usage of different genres, but that is caused on one hand by my love for the Japanese associative art of the free brush, called *zuihitsu*, but also by a lack of Novák’s strict discipline. He too had some objections to the free argumentation of my dissertation. “You have enough material here for two dissertations, but you must document everything very carefully,” he would stress. I think in this respect Novák taught me well, since in my analyses of Japanese literature—for example in *Landscapes of the Japanese Soul*—I support all critical statements with quotes from the original text.

Together with Professor Vlasta Hilská, Novák founded the school of Czech translation from Japanese. In the first period of his translator’s career he tended towards cooperation with well-known poets, for example, with Jan Vladislav. He also praised the cooperation of Professor Hilská with Bohuslav Mathesius. Gradually he became convinced that Japanologists should work out their own style of translation of Japanese poetry and that it was therefore better to try to create one’s own poetry. Miroslav Novák says in an interview with Jiří Šebek that he does not mean to criticize his own cooperation with the poet Vladislav, but that he respects the gradual ripening of his own translating efforts. In one period of his creation he simply cooperated with a major poet, but then came a period when he decided to translate

everything by himself. Though most of the haiku in the collection *Moons, Blossoms* reads beautifully to this day, in some I am slightly disturbed by the many diminutives, by the rhyming and a slightly “sweet” Slavic lyrical tone. Even in Hilská’s work Novák perceived in Mathesius’s undoubtedly skillful touch the strong influence of a Slavic type of verse that we find in the work of Čelakovský or Erben. Where Mathesius was unable to detach himself from his Slavistic background, Novák was striving for a more direct linking of older Japanese and modern Czech. For example, his translation of Saikaku’s famous novel *The Greatest Courtesan* is a work of sheer genius that brings together the rich, colloquial Japanese of the Edo period with contemporary, extremely idiomatic and inventive Czech. Novák cleared the way for us younger translators to set out in our own direction. Of course everybody has certain doubts, and so when I started translating the *Manyōshū* collection I sent examples from the first volume to my friend Pavel Šrut—a leading Czech poet—asking him if he would like to do this with me. He replied: “You don’t need me for this, you can manage by yourself.”

The great Japanologist Donald Keene sent me a beautiful New Year’s card a few years ago in which he fondly recalls Dr. Novák:

I met Dr. Novák once. We spent most of the time together by walking the streets of Prague. Very rarely in life did I meet someone who attracted me as much as he did. I had a feeling that here is a real teacher. I’ll never forget him.

What a dreadful contrast between these enthusiastic words and the way Novák was treated in the last years of his tenure at Charles University which he loved and refused to leave when Jiří Jelínek³ tried to convince him to emigrate. The Japanese naturally knew about Novák’s giant contribution to Japanese studies and he was nominated a number of times for the most prestigious prizes. He was not allowed to accept any of them, all being rejected by the Ministry of Culture.

In those long years at Charles Novák was allowed to make only one trip to Japan, though he was invited many times since the time that Japan Foundation was established. After 1970, in the years of normalization he was not even allowed to attend receptions at the Japanese Embassy. He was a very reclusive and shy man and even if we knew each other very well, he never said a word about his fundamental aversion to the Communist regime.

3 Jiří Jelínek, one of Novák’s best pupils and a brilliant linguist who specialized in machine translation. After 1968 he went abroad and worked for the Japanese Sharp Company for some years.

It is no mistake that the Japanese residents of Prague gave him the very fitting nickname of Monk Takuan. Sōhō Takuan (1573–1645) was an influential Zen master of the Rinzai sect who was active during the time of transition from the Ashikaga Shogunate to the Tokugawa government.

A great Canadian intellectual who profoundly influenced me was a colleague from the University of Toronto, Professor Robertson Davies, nominated in 1963 to become the first master of Massey College. Though this exclusive college is a part of the university, it is conceived as a copy of an elite English university college, something like Oxford or Cambridge. It has its own library, dining room, comfortable rooms and selected students from all over the world. I also lived there a year, so that I came to know the atmosphere of Massey quite well. I met Davies in the corridor or at his lectures. He was an imposing gentleman with a beautifully cultivated full beard, an eccentric of the English type in the best sense of the word. Though he came from a Puritanical cultural background, he did not like boring Presbyterian goody two-shoes. Exactly for that reason he set his immortal novel *Fifth Business* in the tranquil, even pokey little town of Deptford, a faithful copy of his native Thamesville in Southern Ontario. In my view *Fifth Business* is one of the five finest novels of the twentieth century. It fascinated me especially with its central theme, the search for a figure that is so painfully missing from the Puritanical culture, namely the Goddess of Mercy or the merciful Holy Virgin. Guilt in this culture is absolute and nobody can take it off you. Spending time with my students I realized that you cannot put aside your moral responsibility even in moments of leisure or relaxation. In my old country you can make any outrageous statements by the campfire and they will all be forgotten in the morning. Not so here, the appalled boys looked at me and whispered: “How can you say that...”

Davies impresses me especially with his reasonable and sober application of Jungian archetypes, his great respect for myth and generally his aversion to what he so fittingly calls “modern twaddle.” I am also not very fond of Neo-Freudians like Jacques Lacan with their cynical relativism and if I do indulge in any kind of psychological explanation in my essays on Japanese literature, it is rather Jungian. Where I speak about the explication of myths, I stick rather to the pioneering studies of Mircea Eliade, especially his *Myth of the Eternal Return*. Among the later researchers I was mostly influenced by Joseph Campbell and the British Japanologist Carmen Blacker.

Among those who had a decisive influence on me, no matter how briefly I met them, was the American critic and writer Leslie Fiedler who sometime in 1979 gave a fantastic lecture in the packed large auditorium of Medical College. This lecture confirmed my basic approach to literature. Fiedler is the author of path-breaking studies on American literature, especially the outstanding book from 1960 called *Love and Death in the American Novel*. He was a rebel and a firebrand, called the “wild man of criticism.” This is how he started his lecture:

I have a few years to go before retirement, the university gave me tenure and so I can finally tell you the truth. They try to convince you that the study of literature is extremely hard, that it's very difficult work for which you need strict scholarly discipline, etc. Don't believe them, literature is above all emotion... The other day I was lying in my bathtub and reading Dickens' *Little Dorrit*. Suddenly I hear the dripping of water—tap, tap, tap—and I think that I left open the faucet. Then I look and it's tight, but the dripping are my tears falling into the water. I repeat, literature is emotion.

When my friend Ken Tsuruta read my first study on Kawabata Yasunari 川端康成's *Snow Country*, he said, “It's interesting, but why do you have to put on that Germanic armour?” By Germanic armour he meant the theoretical apparatus, difficult Latinized words and the like. I understood that I was standing at a crossroads and had to make up my mind as to which road to follow: the road of theory, structuralism or postmodernism in the direction of the highly theoretically oriented University of Chicago, or hold on to great Czech critics F.X. Šalda and Václav Černý, or Northrop Frye, Robertson Davies and Leslie Fiedler and forge my own path.

I was extremely lucky that around that time the greatest Canadian critic and literary scholar, Northrop Frye, was lecturing at the University of Toronto. His pivotal study of Canadian identity and imagination called *The Bush Garden* became my favorite book, almost a key to my new homeland. The way Canadians understand the word *bush* is unique to this country and very difficult to translate, because it denotes those huge, impenetrable spaces that stretch thousands and thousands of miles above the narrow strip of inhabited territory along the US border. We realized the giant size of the Canadian landmass and an entirely different perception of distances at first when after arrival in Toronto we bought

a second-hand Volkswagen and set out for the North. A wild wind that nearly blew us off the highway was hissing from the fields and by the time we reached Barrie, a town barely 100 km away from Toronto we were so frightened that we reversed the car and returned to the city. Frye documents his penetrating insights about the absolute difference of the Canadian wilderness in comparison with anything European with a discussion about the famous painters' Group of Seven, the most famous being Tom Thompson, Lawren Harris and Emily Carr, who was also a gifted writer. Thompson painted in Algonquin Park on Georgian Bay, and every schoolchild in Canada knows his lonely and weather-beaten gnarled pines on rocky cliffs or his floods of golden-red leaves in the autumn woods. Frye was the first one to notice that on the canvasses of these painters there is no horizon and human beings are missing from them. And that is the basic Canadian experience: there is no horizon in the bush, because the other end cannot be seen and in the Canadian landscape there are so few people because "neighbors" are at least 10–15 kilometres away. That sparse inhabitation brings with it the danger of what Frye calls "garrison mentality," where a small defensive community of people is besieged by a hostile wilderness whose size and power are overwhelming:

To sum up, Canadian poetry is at best the poetry of incubus and *cauchemar*, the source of which is the unusually exposed contact of the poet with nature which Canada provides. Nature is seen by the poet, first as an unconsciousness, then as a kind of existence which is cruel and meaningless, then as the source of the cruelty and subconscious stampededings within the human mind. As compared with American poets, there has been comparatively little, outside Carman, of the cult of the rugged outdoor life which idealizes nature and tries to accept it. Nature is consistently sinister and menacing in Canadian poetry.

Frye's lecture on the Holy scriptures was called *The Great Code* and later published as a book, in which Frye convincingly developed the idea that the Bible is the basic source of inspiration for all Western literature. This helped me to clearly understand what is then the great code of Japanese literature, on which the Bible did not have the least influence. The code of Japanese literature that so radically differs from the biblical one is the dramatic changing of seasons, seasonal rituals, identification with the natural cycle and natural moods. It is most extensively and convincingly codified in the first great anthology of

Japanese poetry, *The Collection of Ten Thousand Leaves (Manyōshū)*. For this crucially important understanding I am indebted to Professor Frye.

Thanks to Professor Nakanishi Susumu 中西進 in 1994, I was invited to the International Research Center for Japanese Studies (Nichibunken) in Kyoto where I spent six months from January to the end of June after returning from Prague. It was a priceless experience, because Nichibunken was and still is the meeting place of foremost Japanese intellectuals. Next to Professor Nakanishi, whom I came to know a few years before, I became acquainted with extraordinary people like Umehara Takeshi, Yamaori Tetsuo, Haga Tōru, Kawai Hayao and others. Umehara Takeshi was at the time director of the institute and I am still puzzled as to how he managed to find the time amidst his responsible and demanding job to write a series of solid books. One of his most original studies is called *People of the Manyōshū and the Heart of the Poems*. Umehara was the first scholar who dared to honestly analyse the rough political background and state that meant that Kakinomoto Hitomaro, Ōtomo no Yakamochi and others were in fact scapegoats who were either exiled or executed.

Professor Yamaori is a foremost Japanese expert on the history of religion and the author of many books; the most important ones are *Religious Consciousness of Modern Japanese*, *The Ethnology of Death: Japanese Views of Life and Death and Burial Rituals*, *Critical Problems in Facing Death*, and *Evil and Rebirth*. Professor Yamaori made categorical statements about a number of contemporary ethical problems, e.g. the question of the problematic sect Ōmu Shinrikyō, organ transplants from brain-dead people, or some speeches of the previous prime minister Mori Yoshirō that have the unfortunate reputation of many *faux pas*. The beauty of Professor Yamaori's style is that he can explain the most complex psychic phenomena in a lucid, clear way.

Professor Haga devoted several years to the study of Oriental utopias and wrote in a very revealing way about the Chinese fable *Peach Blossom Spring* in a book called *Ideal Places in History: East and West*. At Nichibunken he directed an outstanding seminar on ideal places (archetypes) in Japanese and Western culture which inspired me so much that I later wrote a book on the same topic called *Between Heaven and Earth: Ideal Places in Japanese Culture* and dedicated it to Professor Haga.

Professor Nakanishi, a foremost expert on *Manyōshū*, led a seminar entitled *Japanese Imagination*. I contributed to it a study of Miyazawa Kenji, whom I like a lot. On New Year's Day the imperial couple compose festive poems and Professor Nakanishi is

their advisor. His trail-blazing seminar inspired me to write my best critical book thus far, called *Landscapes of the Japanese Soul*, which received the Publishers' Award for Best Book of the Year, 2001 in Prague. In 1993 Professor Nakanishi visited a symposium in Prague and I invited him and his wife to my *furusato* in Stará Boleslav.

The lectures of Professor Kawai were extremely instructive; he considers himself a Jungian and interprets Japanese fairy tales in Carl Jung's spirit (*The Japanese Psyche: Major Motifs in the Fairy Tales of Japan*). The conclusion of his wonderful seminar on Jungian archetypes and psychology sounded like a revelation to me. Professor Kawai said:

Where your Western concept of the human mind sinks in a descending motion from the social persona, personal I, anima and animus all the way down to non-consciousness towards the *id* where you find only inert elements of nature, we find the soul of nature and nothingness as everythingness and a source of the universe. Where you come to an end, we find a beginning.

In the spring of 1995 I was greatly honored by an invitation to an important conference on Tanizaki, prepared meticulously on the premises of the illustrious University of Venice by Professor Adriana Boscaro. All the world experts and translators of the master's work gathered in the lagoon city: Professor Howard Hibbett, Anthony Chambers, Paul McCarthy, Ken Ito, Donald Richie (with an interesting contribution on film adaptations of Tanizaki's novels and short stories), Jacqueline Pigeot and many others. Edward Seidensticker was also to come, but he already had problems with his legs and the only way to get around in Venice is on foot. I met Seidensticker at the University of Toronto once and would have loved to see him again: he was an upright and honest man, almost abrasive at times, but an extremely gifted translator. I had his *Sound of the Mountain* at hand when I translated Kawabata's novel into Czech and it was truly brilliant.

I chose a seminal work by Tanizaki called *Love for Mother* (*Haha o kouru ki*), without which one cannot understand the master's work. The afternoons were usually free and so we travelled the lagoons with Eva, watched the sun-tanned Venetians repair the soaked foundations of their houses and visited the famous cathedral of San Marco. We even made a trip to nearby Padua, where Antonio of Padua, my own and my son's patron saint is buried in a stately basilica. There we saw beautiful paintings by Titian and Veronese. An unforgettable trip was also to the "island of glass," Murano, where my wife bought a beautiful doll. Italian

food—*zuppa di pesce, grigliata mista marinara, pizza marinara, risotto, tartuffo* sweets—was divine. We spent a wonderful week in this blessed country and I again clearly realized that Italians may be bad soldiers, but they are artists of life.

In April of 1997 I finished my lectures at the University of Toronto and according to the nonsensical rules of that time about mandatory retirement I became Professor Emeritus at the age of 65. These days the rule does not apply anymore, and an academic who has not lost his marbles and delivers a solid performance in his job can stay as long as he or she wishes. In that ensuing decade or so, I could still have educated a few good postgraduate students, but not much time would have been left for my *Manyōshū* translation. In June 1996 an ASPAC (Asia Pacific) conference was held at the University of Alberta in Edmonton, and it was attended by two Japanese professors, Mori Michiko from Ōtemae University in Kobe, and Odagiri Hiroko from Fukui University. Ken Tsuruta knew Professor Odagiri very well and she informed him that she and Michiko were given the task of finding a visiting Canadian professor of Comparative Literature and Culture for Ōtemae. In the fall of 1996 both ladies came from Budapest to my *furusato* of Stará Boleslav and my son drove us on beautiful excursions to the castle of Karlštejn and Prague's monuments. Stará Boleslav is an ancient place, so I could show my son the memorable sites of our native town such as the church of Saint Wenceslas, where we were both baptized, the church of Holy Ascension and many others. Ken Tsuruta recommended me to Ōtemae University and so by the end of April 1997, even before the semester ended, I was sitting on a plane headed for Kansai International Airport in Osaka.

Ōtemae University was at that time a strictly female university and its campus was located in the residential area of Nishinomiya between Osaka and Kyoto, an ideal location and a very comfortable environment with the Inland Sea on one side and the evergreen mountain range of Rokkō on the other. The university also offered a spacious free apartment for visiting professors, the salary was generous and my living conditions were absolutely ideal. One of my courses had the unusual title of “Communication with Foreign Cultures” so I could tell the students in the first class that they see in front of them a living example of the symbiosis of three cultures. When I now imagine the complete isolation of these pampered wellborn girls from any kind of direct international experience and the fact that the outside world was mediated to them only through popular music groups and the Internet, it is clear to me that they must have perceived me as a very outlandish creature at the beginning.

Since their life experience was so incompatibly different from mine, communication with them was not easy. To rely on what we had in common with their well-educated grandfathers, namely the cultural heritage of Japan and Europe, was out of the question. My friend Ken got a job at Ryūkoku University in the nearby town of Ōtsu and told me how in the first class he asked, “And what books have you read lately?” and the students answered with a bored expression, “We don’t read books anymore.”

To my question if they had ever heard the name Kawabata Yasunari, my students answered simply that they never had. In my day it would have been unthinkable if Czech university students were not familiar with the name Karel Čapek, but times have changed. I asked them to buy a pocket edition of *Yama no oto*, Kawabata’s most important novel, to read it and come to a discussion seminar about it. They all came and they had all diligently read the novel. A two-hour discussion showed that they understood the novel very well, and their reactions were to the point; from this I understood that the generation of these twenty year olds is not stupid or insensitive at all, just hopelessly drowned in the *tsunami* of irrelevant information that keeps coming at them day after day. The main problem is how to orient oneself in that flood of information and find the right pieces.

Another time I showed them Kurosawa’s remarkable film *Dersu Uzala* that takes place in Siberia and whose protagonist is a hunter from the Goldi tribe, but in essence it is a search for the original Japanese identity. Kurosawa is interested in the parallels between an existing representation of the hunting culture and the ancient Japanese of the Jōmon period, when they made their living as hunters and food gatherers. Of course I did not realize that to suggest to pampered girls from the families of managers, dentists, businessmen, bankers and engineers that their direct ancestor was a shabby, bandy-legged savage from the taiga, was a little bit too audacious. When I asked them how the film impressed them, one of them said, “It’s too complicated, we don’t get it.” “And what would you like to see, what would be more understandable?” I asked. “My Neighbor Totoro” (*Tonari no totoro*), they replied. It was now my turn to be lost, for I knew next to nothing about Japanese anime and up until then I considered it a genre for children. When the girls gave me a copy of Totoro and I had a good look at it, it was clear at first sight that the director of the film uses a whole array of Japanese archetypal motifs such as the land of roots (*ne no kuni*), the sacred rope of *shimenawa* and that the round fluffy animal protagonist is a perfect representation of Jung’s archetype of consoling roundness that acquires special significance in times of cultural turmoil and despair. The course

taught me a lot, expanding my horizons, and I do hope that my students also derived some benefit from it.

My colleagues from Ōtemae said, “If you want to know the real age of your students, you have to deduct twelve years from their physical age.” So I was teaching girls around eight years old and indeed their real psychic setup corresponded to this age. Psychologists have been talking for a number of years now about the gradual infantilization of mankind, but it seems to me that this process is more pronounced in Japan than in the West. I called my lectures at Ōtemae “an endurance test in a ‘Papin’ cooking pot,” because the officials there asked me to lecture partly in English, but tuition in spoken English was not very good at the time so the students did not understand me and I had to switch completely to Japanese. This was of course very good for my oral language skills.

So when I finished teaching at Ōtemae in 1999 I took a one-year leave of absence and concentrated fully on the translation of *Manyōshū*. I owe the original idea to my dear friend Ken Tsuruta, who was born in the same year as I and when we both retired, he told me, “Modern literature is interesting, but the real treasures are in the classics. All the rest is already derived.” In the fall of 1999 a malicious ailment took him away forever, but I will always fondly remember him. I started working on this enormous project around 1997–98 and searched for a suitable publisher during my frequent trips to Prague. Larger publishers are not eager to publish a four-volume edition of poetry, so I settled on a small publisher called Brody, run by young, enterprising people. They entrusted the graphic layout to a leading graphic artist, Mr. Ziegler, who did a wonderful job. This huge project took me about twelve years to complete, years when I lived like a hermit or a Zen monk. And yet, it was an exciting time immersing oneself in this marvelous text and finding something new every day. It was a time of great adventure. I use the last poem of the collection, 4516, as a New Year’s greeting and likewise one can find in *Manyōshū* a poem for any situation or mood in human life:

Like today’s snow that falls on the first spring day, may all the things in the New Year be good.

I tried to find out into which world languages the *Manyōshū* has been translated, and it seems that aside from Korean and Chinese, so far there is only French. I had this translation by the already departed Japanologist René Sieffert at hand when I was translating the

last fourth volume and I must say that it is an outstanding translation. Sieffert managed something that all translators from difficult languages long for: to combine scholarly accuracy with poetry and readability. I have only one objection: Sieffert left out all pillow words (*makura kotoba*), poetic epithets that complete the atmosphere of individual poems.

A perfect English translation does not yet exist: there is only the first volume, superbly translated by Ian Hideo Levy. I spent some time with him at Nichibunken in Kyoto and I know that he is basically bilingual. His father is an American and his mother Polish, so this project was ideally suited for him. Before he managed to start the second volume, he became a famous writer in Japan who published a bestseller called *A Room Where the Stars and Stripes Cannot Be Heard*. I have not read it, but found it awkward to imagine how somebody can “hear” a flag. Then my colleague Paul McCarthy explained to me that it is not the flag as such but the popular musical composition *The Stars and Stripes Forever*. Ian did not return to translating, to the great regret of Professor Nakanishi who spent a lot of time with him and wanted to educate him as the foremost translator of his beloved collection. He had the gift for it, since his Japanese is as good as his English, which is beautiful and poetic.

Comparing Czech and English I realized the difference in their linguistic possibilities. Though Levy’s translation is outstanding and his language has a nice, soft flow, Czech is a priori closer to the original Japanese for its natural lyrical tone and thus better suited for emotional Japanese poems than the more sober and factual English. When we imagine a time without newspapers, telephones, email and text messages, we realize that *Manyōshū* was in fact a substitute for these modern tools of communication.

Instead of an email message or telephone call the nobleman of the eighth century simply sent his message in the form of a short poem, which he tied to an appropriate present or simply a sprig of seasonal blossoms. When he did not like something in the political life of the realm he could write long poem called *chōka* and endow it with intelligible innuendos. The court society was of course so small that any kind of subtle suggestion was understandable to its members.

I loved singing from early childhood and all Czech folk songs entered my bloodstream, so that even nowadays I can sing a few stanzas of every one of them. Only when translating some of the work songs or folk songs from the *Manyōshū* did I realize how close they are to ours and that helped me find a natural, colloquial tone for them. The essential symbiosis of a country person’s emotional life and the metaphorical expression

in both cultures is surprisingly similar. The identification of a beautiful girl with a flower is as common in the *Manyōshū* as it is in the Czech folk song: “You Katie, are a white rose...” Let us compare a poem by J.V. Sládek, who also started out from the folk song, with its Japanese counterparts:

“Into the depths of your soul, into the pool of your thoughts I lower my head like a bundle of forget-me-nots into the river.”

思い草の茎が川に向かって屈みこんでいるように、私も、貴女の心奥の深みの前でうなちを下げ、あなたの奥深いたましいの底にある淵まで沈みます。

335 The Abyss of Dreams

I trust my journey won't be long; may Yume no Wada, the Abyss of Dreams not turn into rapids but still be an unmoving pool.

我が行きは久にはあらじ夢のわだ瀬にはならずて淵にありこそ。

The feeling of emotional depth, an immersion into one's partner's soul is perfectly captured here by the “botanical” and natural metaphor.

Czech and Japanese *kunimi*:

Roughly at the time when Emperor Jomei was ascending the Heavenly Mountain of Kagu to perform his famous *kunimi*, a forefather Czech went up a similar Sacred Hill, called Říp, and performed much the same ritual:

Behold, this is the land you were looking for. I often talked to you about it and promised that I'll lead you here. This is the promised land, abounding with honey, full of birds and beasts. You'll have plenty of everything and this land will protect us from enemies. Look, a country of your dreams!

Many are the mountains of Yamato, but I climb the heavenly Kagu hill that is cloaked in foliage, and stand on the summit to view the land. On the plain of land, smoke from the hearths rises, rises. On the plain of waters, gulls rise one after another. A splendid land is the dragonfly island, the land of Yamato!

Border guards' songs (*sakimori no uta* 防人の歌)

Japanese translation from czech

僕が馬に乗り、
サーベルはびかびかと光るが、
愛しい人の心が割れるのではないか

***Manyōshū no uta* 万葉集の歌**

By the order of the Emperor I said goodbye to my beautiful wife, took her hand one last time and now I sail along the islands.

おほきみの、みことかしこみ、うつくしけ、まこがてはなり、しまづたひゆく (4414)

When translating a poetic anthology that is as difficult as *Manyōshū*, the translator runs into many seemingly unsolvable linguistic puzzles. I was often wracking my brain for days, even weeks before I found a viable compromise. For example the expression *tamakushige o akeru*, literally to open an inlaid box with combs, has concrete erotic connotations in the original text. But opening a box with combs is not very poetical in Czech and does not sound like something very precious. With a heavy heart I decided to translate this expression as “box with jewels” or “jewelled box,” as Levy renders it in English.

While translating *Manyōshū* I was very lucky that this long and demanding task was faithfully supported by my wife, who has as a writer an infallible feeling for the Czech language and is not burdened by the perfectionism of a specialist. I wrote a basic draft for many of the poems and Eva turned them into beautiful Czech poetry. She was especially successful with the women’s poems, for her feminine sensitivity enabled her to deeply immerse herself into the original meaning of the poems.

Whenever I felt miserable in the last ten or fifteen years, I always turned to *Manyōshū* and found solace in it. Only after immersing myself for ten years in this marvelous, wise text and losing myself in it, I discovered myself again, finally grasping the depth of the Japanese concept of *mono no aware* that I did not understand as a young man; now I know that it is the unbearable beauty and sadness of life.

In the fall of 2014 I received an unexpected email from Nara Prefecture Complex of Man’yo Culture 奈良県立万葉文化館 that took my breath away. They offered me the

prestigious Nara Manyō World Prize, under two conditions: first, that I would appear in person at the acceptance ceremony and second, that I would give a speech in Japanese. These conditions were fairly easy to fulfill, though I was a bit worried about the long and exhausting trip. Thanks to JAL I made it without any problems, arriving in Nara on the evening of 19 March. The elegant and dignified ceremony, hosted gracefully by Professor Nakanishi, took place on 21 March.

The reward ceremony was attended by officials from the Nara Prefectural government and some of my Japanese and Czech friends. From Fukui came Professor Karel Fiala, a man who did more for the awarding of the prize than anybody else. I was very happy to see the dear faces of my friends from Ōtemae, Mori Michiko, Tamaki Akemi and Odagiri Hiroko from Fukui Graduate Women's College in the audience. The graphic designer of several of my books, Ms. Daniela Renčová, even came all the way from Prague. A few days later came Jura Matela, a younger Czech colleague from Brno University.

The three weeks in Japan went by like a dream. I visited all the great sites in Nara related to *Manyōshū*: Mt. Miwa, the Three Sacred Mountains of Yamato in Fujiwarakyō, and places associated with other classics or historical personalities, such as Kashihara Jingū, Asuka-dera, etc. Again I realized that this is one of the last fully functioning human communities in the world.

Jura took me for an unforgettable trip to a mountain spa, Yunomine Onsen in the Kii peninsula of Wakayama prefecture, where we spent about three days. It is called “the mother of Japanese *onsen*” and it is probably the oldest, the smelliest and most sacred among all of Japanese spas. A few steps from it runs the venerable pilgrim's old path of Kumano (Kumano Kodō).

When I was leaving Nara and saying “*sayonara*” to my Japanese friends, I added, “And if I happen to be reborn in the future, let it be in Japan!”

