

## *A Summer in Hokkaido*

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My time in Hokkaido University at the Slavic-Eurasian Research Center was not my first visit to Japan. Far from it. I had been about eight times before, to various places in Honshu and to Okinawa. My wife Aya was born in Kobe where her parents and brother still live. So I can say honestly that, following a series of communications with Osuga-San of the SRC, I had an idea what to expect when we arrived at Chitose airport, via Tokyo, on June 1, after a very long journey from Edmonton, Alberta, Canada.



Otaru (the author and his spouse Aya)

Sapporo is the capital and by far the largest city in Hokkaido. It is a bustling, busy city, interspersed with spacious parks and a central region, Odori, containing a pleasant green area, which is the site in the summer of a hospitable beer garden, under the shadow of the TV tower. Public transport is efficient, and it is also easy to get around, as thousands do, by bicycle, though cyclists (and I became one) use sidewalks rather than the roads, finding their way around pedestrians.

Aya and I opted to find our own residence, at an apartment overlooking Nakajima Park. It was a beautiful spot and we were on the seventh floor with views to Mount Moiwa in one direction and over the park in the other. The sunsets were extraordinary. Our apartment had two bedrooms, though only the main lounge adjoining the smaller bedroom was air conditioned. The University of Hokkaido is four stops on the subway from Nakajima Park so in the morning I had a pleasant walk by the lake initially and through the university grounds at the end.

The SRC is housed in a complex of buildings overlooking some tennis courts. The easiest access for a newcomer is through the library, but eventually I found some short cuts. Staff was friendly and helpful. My host, Koshino-San, who studies Belarusian and Russian literature, gave me a tour of the library and the SRC. I was provided with a large office on the fifth (the highest) floor, with a computer, sofa, coffee table, and several chairs as well as a main desk. The fifth floor housed both full-time faculty and visiting fellows. I got to know Tabata-San and his wife Tomoko-San—we have mutual friends in the United States—Mochizuki-San, and fellow Canadian Thomas Lahusen from the University of Toronto, who was working on a documentary film on Harbin.

The SRC director, Osamu Ieda, was a wonderful host, as was his wife Yuko-San, who hosted several social occasions that allowed Aya and I to meet the graduate students and junior professors. Most events took place directly in his office on the second floor. There we met a former director, an anthropologist who regaled us with stories about the Ainu on Hokkaido and southern Sakhalin Island (Russia) just to the north. He had made a study of Bronislaw Pilsudski (brother of Josef), who spent his time in exile studying the lifestyles of the Ainu (he lived in an Ainu village and married an Ainu woman), the aboriginal people of Japan, who eventually succumbed to Imperial Japanese expansion and occupation of the large northern island.

If one visits Hokkaido University in the summer, one will note two distinct features. First of all, there are the crows. These are not North American crows, but huge birds with vicious beaks. And they congregate in vast numbers. It is a sight that makes Alfred Hitchcock's old horror film *The Birds* pale by comparison. And they were nesting, which obviously made them hostile to intruders. Never in my life had I imagined that crows would attack humans, but they did, and frequently, dive bombing in pairs. Accessing the Center through the ground floor entrance became quite hazardous until the university authorities removed all the nests. The fearless crow army then reassembled by the tennis courts. And that leads me to the second feature.

Students gathered daily on the courts. They played some game that certainly resembled tennis. But it was more complicated. It involved sometimes six people at a time, along with cheerleading factions of both genders, who at times were leaping up and down like demented pogo dancers. The players also had a code of bellowing. It sounded like something between a ram and an angry bull, and the first bellow would be echoed by a chorus of others. These calls began from early morning until the time I left my office at night, often unaffected by torrential downpours of rain. Tabata-San apparently complained at one point but was informed that the bellowing was a student tradition and that he simply didn't comprehend the custom. Neither did I, frankly, but I learned to live with it.



Mount Tengu

We soon explored the fascinating city. Sapporo is a winter resort, but the summers are also interesting, with various activities: spectacular firework displays, jazz and folk concerts, shrine festivals, concerts in Nakajima Park, which houses an impressive concert hall, ramen restaurants and night clubs in Susukino, and of course cold beer under the sun, with the famous Japanese beers on offer: Sapporo, Asahi, and Kirin. We got summer passes for Mount Moiwa, and I went there three times in all, using the two cable cars to the summit and enjoying the wonderful views of the city, both at daytime and at night.

Ieda-Sensei and Yuko-San invited Aya and I to their house in Otaru, a short train ride to the west, on the Sea of Japan. We began at the fish market, with its extraordinary display of *maguro*, *uni*, and *kani*—we later enjoyed trying *hakkaku*.

While in Otaru, I accompanied Ieda-Sensei and a group of students on an excursion, which started with Mount Tengu—another cable car ride—where there was a museum on the top. I had met Tengu in Kyoto, but here his legend seemed to be more elaborate and the museum contained a host of Tengus, all with the usual oversized snout, a sort of Japanese version of Pinocchio, though in Tengu's case a source of good fortune, if tales are to be believed. Together with the students I made a wish by stroking the nose of a Tengu sculpture outside the cable car building. Incidentally the legendary Tengu supposedly comprised characteristics of both a human and a bird of prey, which might help to explain the crow phenomenon described above.

The views over the Japan Sea were unforgettable. In the distance a ferry was transporting passengers south to Kyoto, a trip of some 30 hours according to Ieda-Sensei. To the north and west lay Russia. I was able at last to take stock of my companions. Three were Japanese (including Morishita-San and Kanayama-San) and three were Chinese, along with Ieda-Sensei and his daughter Ryoko-San. The Chinese spoke Japanese and a little English.



At Lake Toya

After the mountain we took busses around, visiting a replica of a herring factory some distance from the main town of Otaru, close to the aquarium and—

after our last proposed tour, the building where delegates of Russian and Japan had met after the Russo-Japanese war of 1904–05, turned out to be locked—somewhat bizarrely to the only mosque in Hokkaido, where we were greeted by two men originally from Pakistan. They supplied us with coke and 7-Up, which we drank on the carpet of the mosque, facing Mecca, while the daughter of the older man, who had been educated in the United States, explained the workings of the mosque.

In August, Aya and I rented a car and visited Lake Toya, an area of spectacular volcanic mountains and lakes just two hours away from Sapporo, eating some wonderful food at the Windsor Hotel, located on the top of a hill. We went to Neboribetsu with its fascinating *onsen* and bear park high up in the mountains, a surreal environment where bears stand on their hind legs and demand food, which visitors can purchase from a machine for 300 yen.

Both Aya and I benefited from the expertise of fellow scholars and the resources of the SRC. The university library houses an impressive collection of Slavic materials, and even for Ukraine, the area on which I was working, the resources were equal to those of my home university, meaning better than most libraries of North America. They took some finding at first, but the search proved worthwhile. A highlight for me was the monthly graduate seminar, organized by Saito-San, and attended by Assel Bitabarova from Kazakhstan, Karashima-San, Goto-San, Yoshiyuki-San, Kawazu-San, and an African PhD student in Economics, John Kalenga.

In July, the SRC held a major symposium on thirty years of crisis in Eurasia, 1914–45, with visiting scholars from USA, Italy, Turkey, and other parts of Japan. It was an invigorating and intense two days, accompanied by field trips to the Ainu Museum and the Historical Village of Hokkaido (*Kaitaku no Mura*), an open-air museum of buildings from various parts of Hokkaido representing the period (1868–1926). Our hosts, interpreting on the bus in entertaining versions of English, were Uyama-San and Chida-San from the SRC.

Aya also presented a paper close to her current research interests, on Canada's response to Euromaidan in Ukraine, and the role of the Ukrainian community. In general having Aya with me made life incredibly simple. I was able to visit places and understand things that would have been incomprehensible had I come alone. She also fit in well with the SRC and its activities, attending symposia and joining in discussions. But more often she could be found in the plush Daimaru store close to campus.

Working at the SRC is a one-time opportunity to get a project done in ideal surroundings and largely without interruption. Indeed, the professors are usually closeted in their offices, working like beavers until sunset. If I had problems, my first contact was Abe-San in the



## Paul's Cafe

No.22 March 2015



General Office, who never failed to help, no matter how mundane the question. Aya and I became good friends with she and her husband Goto-San, a cultural anthropologist at the SRC. The relatively short time I had at the SRC—essentially the summer—proved to be incredibly productive. I was able to finish a major article and numerous shorter ones, as well as complete most of the editing for a book on Euromaidan in Ukraine.

Social occasions were also notable, including the SRC summer barbecue, two outings with the

students—the second ended in a Ramen restaurant near Sapporo JCR station—a frenetic game of futsal one Saturday morning with Tabata-San and Naomi Hyunjoo Chi (a Vancouver-born woman of Korean parentage who teaches at the university), and a celebration of Canada Day organized by Thomas Lahusen and myself in a German-style pub drinking Loewenbrau out of pewter mugs attended by both faculty and students.

Our final social event was a dinner at our apartment with Sanami Takahashi, the only female faculty member at the SRC (as well as the youngest) and her husband Yu Tachibana, a scholar of Azerbaijan. It took place on August 28, the day before I left the SRC. Sanami presented me with a cake adorned a message in icing that said: “Thank you Marples-San.” Yet I felt I should be the one doing the thanking, to my hosts and new friends in Sapporo, to this idiosyncratic country with its complex past and merger of traditional and modern, remarkable politeness and formality contrasting with wild abandon on other occasions. *Arigatou gozaimashita* and see you again soon!