

Roots in Ripon

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Chuck Roots

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My Time in Japan

The island nation of Japan and its colorful and often violent history was shrouded in mystery to the rest of the world for centuries. By their own standards, the Japanese historically maintained an isolationistic philosophy toward any other nation or people group.

I readily admit to having had a growing interest in all things Japanese while growing up in the 1950s. The only thing about Japan I remember then was we defeated them in WWII, and products made in Japan were junk. By the time I actually set foot on Japanese soil in 1971, a lot had changed. Their economy had grown significantly, and their manufacturing had done a complete one-eighty. Japan had become a major force in the world, economically. They showed great vision and foresight in the development and manufacturing of everything from digital watches (remember Swiss watches?), to computers, to automobiles.

In 1960 our family moved to Paris, France. My brother John, wound up attending a college prep school in Saint Gallen, Switzerland. As a twelve-year-old, I was given my first watch that Christmas of '60. It was a Swiss watch. Knowing it was the land where the best watches were made, I was feeling very proud of my new timepiece. A decade later, I was buying a digital watch in Japan. You see, when the idea of digital watches was first introduced, the Swiss watchmakers passed on it. After all, they had the watch market all sown up. Boy, did that ever change. And the Swiss are still trying to figure out what happened.

As a newly promoted corporal in the Marines, my first duty assignment over seas was to MCAS Iwakuni, Japan. I flew out of Travis AFB on December 23, 1971 landing at Yokota AFB many hours later. Upon arrival, we were informed that there would be no connecting flight to Iwakuni until the 26th. Once I secured billeting in the transient barracks, I decided to head for Tokyo, roughly an hour's train ride away. A Marine buddy asked me where I was going. I said, "Tokyo." "Do you speak Japanese?" he asked. "No. Do you?" I replied. He didn't. I said, "Look. You and I are obviously Americans. And with Marine Corps 'high & tight' haircuts, we're obviously military. If you get lost, just say to any Japanese person, 'Iwakuni?' They'll point you in the right direction."

First stop in Tokyo was to the USO where I figured we could learn what might be the best course of action during our three-day-layover. The director asked me if I was hungry. When I said I was, he suggested I walk a few blocks over to the

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McDonalds. I looked at him thinking he was pulling my leg, but he quickly assured me there was indeed the famous Golden Arches just around the corner. Before heading over to check this out (remember, this is 1971), the director had also set it up for me to have Christmas dinner with an American family in Tokyo.

At McDonalds, I enjoyed a Quarter-Pounder with cheese, fries and a coke. But I had to wait in line for quite a while! I remember McDonalds being roundly criticized for planning to put some of there stores in Japan where fish and rice are the staple foods. As we have all learned over the years, McDonalds does their homework. This store was the only one in Tokyo (possibly in all of Japan), but a decade later in 1986, I was back in Japan, this time as a Navy chaplain, and discovered there were four McDonalds in Tokyo alone! And, yes, the meal tasted just like you get back here in the States.

I arrived on the 26th in Iwakuni where I checked into my new command. That first weekend I decided to do some exploring. I had been given the name and contact number of a Catholic nun who served in a diocese just outside of Hiroshima (where the first atomic bomb was dropped in 1945). Sister Margaret was delighted to hear from me and said to come visit right away. I took the 30-minute train ride to Hiroshima, then somehow found my way to the church. This lady was one go-getter! She was a blur of energy. I just followed in her wake as best I could. It was the Japanese New Year, a time of celebration. She had Japanese friends who had invited her (and me by extension) to a celebratory meal at the home of Mr. Shaw Fuji. I discovered he was a teacher at a nearby Japanese school where he taught English. He was a gracious host, and we quickly became friends.

There is a traditional food that is served on New Years in Japan. It is a ball of sticky cooked rice in a bowl of broth. I can well remember looking at this ball of rice sitting at the bottom of the bowl of broth, wondering how I was going to eat this. The eating utensils were a set of chop sticks. So, I grabbed the sticks, watched how others ate, and copied their moves, clumsily. It was one of those moments that stays with you the rest of your life. I'm sure I provided some amusement for the rest of the dinner guests. I'm still not sure how I managed to eat that sticky ball of rice. It was a great experience! And I was honored to have been invited into the home of a Japanese family after only being in the country a few days.

Over the next fifteen years or so I would have several more trips to Japan which I will share with you next week.