

A Memory in Japan

Alberto Mengoni* (ENEA)

It was raining, of course.

The flight JAL405 from Rome was on schedule and landed at 5:15pm of March, 1 at Narita. I passed the custom-counter and met Shirai-san and Sugizaki-san. The light rain which would accompany me for most of the time I spent in Japan was waiting outside. "It's about two hours driving", said Shirai-san.

We arrived in Tokai-mura at about 8:30pm and decided to have some dinner together.

I saw a movie when I was in the United States two months before, 'Tampopo', about noodles. 'Tampopo' is a movie about ramen, soba and udon and that was all I knew about Japanese food at that time. I liked the movie and therefore I simply said, "let's have some noodles".

As we were served with a bowl of chashumen, Shirai-san and Sugizaki-san said "Oh, you can use the chopsticks!". "Well, yes I can" I replied, without knowing that almost every time I'd sit down in a restaurant somebody would ask "can you use the chopsticks?".

Actually I learned to use the chopsticks in Minnesota because a friend of mine, Karin, addressed me with a compassionate glance when I took her to a Chinese restaurant in Minneapolis after she realized that I could not use the chopsticks. Therefore after a couple of days of exercise and several bowls of rice I managed to use

them in a reasonable way. Of course I was very proud of it and very frustrated when somebody in Japan asked "can you use chopsticks?".

The next day I went to JAERI. At a first glance JAERI, Gen-Ken, looked like any other nuclear research establishment that I had visited before. Many buildings, some of which with the typical laboratory-like superstructure with tubes and other signs which tell you that there is maybe a Van De Graaff, a library or a small reactor.

That morning I have been introduced to all the members of the Nuclear Data Center, to the director of the Physics Department and to various administrative executives. I was also informed that as soon as I would get a bank-account they would pay me: the full amount for the stage, immediately. That's something you'd never even dream about in a country like Italy!

I was also informed that there would be a Japanese class for foreigners working in JAERI beginning in about two weeks and I thought that it would be nice to have the opportunity to learn Japanese.

That is very difficult to learn Japanese you realize immediately when you happen to be in Japan. I remember the first day that I went to JAERI I wanted to say "good morning" in Japanese. My 'Japanese at First Glance' read: oh-hayoh gozaimasu. "Easy, isn't it?", I thought. The next morning I could not remember it so I read it again in my booklet. And the same thing I had to do the morning after the next morning and so forth: it took one week to finally remember how to say good morning! I started to think that I was becoming completely dumb until I met Claude (from France) and he told me that he had exactly

the same experience. Even though a statistic with only two events looks very poor I felt much more relaxed about my mental conditions...

Fortunately enough not everything turned out to be so difficult and after a few days that I was there I said, "Shirai-san, I'd like to buy a car". "Fine Alberto, you know that in Japan we drive on the left side of the road. And that is no problem, you will easily learn how to do it. But how are you supposed to know where you'll be driving to if you cannot read Japanese?". "Right", I said. The problem is that the indications of direction are, except for highways and main roads, written in Chinese characters (Kanji).

Well, you have to rely on your visual-memory, or on the curiosity to discover/learn codes. Being a physicist is part of my job to translate "signs" into an understandable meaning: after a while it became very exciting to recognize a character whose meaning can be either clear (when somebody explained how to write it) or obscure (when you only associate the sign to something). Anyway, with a combination of memory, curiosity and fortune you can eventually manage to drive on the right direction.

In my case I have to say that after two weeks I already had been to Mito, Hitachi, Ajigaura, Nakaminato, Oarai and I even had ventured to Kasama.

I have been using my car every day for going to JAERI since I was living in Katsuta. Some of my colleagues were surprised to understand that I wanted to live outside Tokai-mura, where JAERI is located, but I thought that it would be better for me to live closer to Mito and

therefore I rented an apartment in Katsuta which is about 12 Km from Tokai-mura and only 6 Km from Mito.

My apartment was a Japanese-style one and with the surprise of many people, including myself, it has been only a pleasure to live in it.

And now, do you know what? Every single time I mention with some friend of mine here in Italy that I used to live in Japan for half a year, they will inevitably say: "Oh, really! How did you manage with the food? Can you use the chopsticks?"

* Visiting scientist from ENEA under the JAERI invitation program in the period of March to August, 1988.