



The Pen Pals: New Worlds Through Words

Let Hiroko Murata tell us about it:

“When I was child, I lived with grandparents, parents, and sister Noriko. Nowadays, a young Japanese couple doesn’t want to live their parents. But in my childhood, it was a duty that eldest son and his wife took care of his parents. My father Yasuhiko was the eldest son of family Ichikawa, so he and my mother had to live with their parents. Having a son was important wife’s work at that age. When I was born, Yasuhiko was disappointed a little bit, because I was not a boy. But he loved us.

My father worked as officer in Gunma prefecture government. He loved to see the movies with my mother, and he loved also something new — television, stereo, car, electric washing machine, telephone, etc. (they were not so popular of course; our neighbor didn’t have telephone. They used to come to my home and telephoned.) On Sunday evening, my father took us to a western restaurant and he taught us how to eat beefsteak with fork and knife. (For me, it was not fun. To use fork and knife was difficult. Although I enjoyed the western taste!!)

My mother was teacher. She worked elementary school in Maebashi. My mother was so good a teacher that the students loved her. In vacation, graduated students visited our home to see my mother. My mother was generous to them. Sometimes I was jealous of her students.

When Noriko and I were 10 years old, we started to learn English. My parents thought that Japanese would have a chance to go and work in another (foreign) country. So they decided they wanted us learning English. Twice a week, after elementary school finished, we went to Mrs. Kurosawa’s English class. Her class was fun. In it, we couldn’t speak Japanese but we enjoyed a melody of Christmas party and English songs. Noriko and I really wanted to go America (for us, a foreign country means America).

At age 13, we entered Junior High School. In J. H. S. there were lots of clubs. My sister Noriko was member of English Club. She wished to have a foreign friend. So she wrote letter to a principal in America. One month later, huge package full of letters reached us from a New York Junior High School. Were we surprised!!! Noriko delivered those letters to E. C. (English Club) members. I was not member of English Club but Noriko gave me two letters.

One of letters was from Arno. He was fourteen years old and liked music, especially the Beatles. He sent me John Lennon's picture. I also loved listening to the Beatles' song Love Me Do.

"Oh," he wrote, "you know A Hard Day's Night." So he became my pen-pal. He wrote me about his marching band, his mother's job, his hobbies. Then, he asked me "Could you introduce to Japan my mother's company's president whose name is Mr. Bamberger? He's about to go to Japan on a job." I was surprised!!

I showed this letter to Noriko, my family and our English teacher, Mr. Sakanishi. My family (especially my father) was happy to hear that news. And teacher Sakanishi told us "Our English Club could welcome him. Let's have a party for him." So, I wrote to Arno: "Dear Arno, We are happy to hear of your mother's boss visit to us. Please ask him to stay our home. Could you tell us the date of his arrival? We'll wait for him at Maebashi station. P.S. We (Noriko and I) will have a red rose in our right hand. Mr. Bamberger doesn't know us, but he can spot girls holding a red rose.)"

Noriko and I waited for Mr. Bamberger at Maebashi Station, holding a red rose. We waited and waited. At last, he appeared. We saw a handsome tall gentleman. And he asked us "Are you Noriko? Hiroko?" At that moment our long friendship started.



Hiroko(l) and Noriko(r) years later on their first visit to Claude in America.

When he arrived at my house, my grand parents welcomed him in a special way of bowing. Although he seemed to be surprised to see such a bow, he smiled to my grandparents. Then they led him to the room.

After a short but the most pleasant chat, my parents returned from work. Noriko and I introduced him to my parents. Soon my mother prepared dinner for him. She wondered if he would like Japanese food. There was no worry for her to do that, because in fact he loved Japanese food. Before we started dinner, we had to

show him how to use chopsticks. During dinner all of us were watching him all the time, his way of using chopsticks. Finally he said with a big smile, “Don’t look at me, otherwise I’m embarrassed.”

My mother was serving him without eating, so he asked her not to worry about him and to eat together. After dinner my mother said to me in the kitchen, “I just love him. He is so kind and polite. Moreover he can use chopsticks so well.”

The time for Mr. Bamberger to retire to bed had come, so my mother brought a futon for him. Again my mother had to worry that it might be too small for him. He didn’t care about its size. He actually enjoyed sleeping on it. In spite of the fact that everything was new for him, he was always smiling and asking lots of questions of us. The very next morning he was surprised to see that my mother was putting aside the futon. Just a while ago the room he was sleeping in was a bedroom and now it turned out to be the living room. He was so excited he said, ‘It was just like magic!’”

Hiroko’s husband, Minoru, is a neurosurgeon. One of their daughter’s, Nodoka, is especially proud of her continued correspondence with Claude. Maybe she caught the bug from her mother, who once wrote, “for me, Mr. Claude Bamberger is like a window. Through Claude’s window I can see the whole world. He shows us wonderful, mysterious world with different ideas, thinking and religions. We live in such a small, closed, one-race country, so for us to know Claude Bamberger is to know the world.”



Hiroko’s sister, Noriko, takes up the tale:

“My name is Noriko. I was born on May 3, 1948. It is a national holiday, Japanese law foundation day. So my parents named me Noriko (“Nori” means law and “ko” means child). The name of most girls my age ended in “ko.”

I married with Terutada in 1970. I went to a senior high school and convent college for girls. I was believed too shy to look for husband. So my aunt introduced Terutada. My aunt is a physician. Her patient’s husband is Terutada’s boss. I met Terutada and I liked his smiling face. He was born 20 June 1942. He is an only child, he doesn’t have any brother and sister. His father died when was one year old. His mother

died soon after we married. He majored in chemical engineering at graduate school in Gumma Ken. He worked for IGC till July last year and works for Mitsubishi now. We have two boys, Akihiko, married to Mami, and Takashi, married to Shinobu.

When I was a teenager, I wanted to go to the U.S.A. America was my dream country. I didn't have enough courage to go there by myself. It was not to be the U.S.A. but Indonesia; still I was glad to live in an overseas country. We lived in Jakarta for four years from 1974 to 1978. I love Indonesia. I love Indonesian people, songs, culture, nature very much. I belonged to Indonesian songs chorus group. I still sing Indonesian songs with the same group in Tokyo once a month.

I worked for Japan Development Bank for one and a half years after college. Soon after we came back from Jakarta we lived very near to my aunt's clinic. I work for the clinic when I am needed as a housemaid, driver or secretary. My aunt comes to my house to have dinner together almost every day. My aunt is my mother's younger sister. She is a single, never married. My aunt is like my mother since my mother died when I was 46 years old. My aunt is 73 years old and working as a physician.



Here she is with Seiko Tomaita (Center) and Ikuko Kanda (right)

I think gardening is one of the highlights in my life. I was not interested in it while my father was alive. My father liked gardening and farming. He loved roses, I like scented plants. I sowed many kinds of herb seeds like chamomile and mallon and fennel. I enjoy herbs

making tea, potpourri, wreath and taking herb bath. While gardening I found wonder and beauty of nature. The sky before dawn, a drop on the leaf, the air a few minutes after sunset and so on.”

Reflecting on her visit with Claude in Tenafly, Noriko tells him in a letter, “You were the Claude I remembered — a wonderful warm-hearted person. We talked and laughed like we used to, and you seemed to be interested in everything about Japanese culture and customs.”



Hiroko Murata’s daughter, Nodoka, carries on her mother’s tradition. She writes Claude:

“It is amazing that we have been corresponding about 10 years. I don’t remember when I started to write to you. I knew that my letters were horrible at the incipient stage, so I don’t want to recall them. No matter how horrible they were, you never gave up reading them. That’s the best reason that explains how we could maintain our correspondence such a long time. First, I wrote to you about trivial things, but now I write about everything. You are a wonderful listener. Without you and Mo-Li, my life would be utterly boring and meaningless.

I asked you so many things such as why couldn’t I have a real friend as you do, or how can I cope with people with whom I don’t want to be, or how I could control my appetite. You answered all questions that I asked. Even my parents didn’t, but you did.

I also write about a lot of movies how I feel about it or how I like it. It doesn’t matter whether you have seen them or not, you always give me some comments. Those comments enable me to have a new aspect or view.

We have known each other for years, but I only knew you through all those correspondence and pictures of you and Mo-Li. I could easily see kindness and consideration in their face.

Last year my dream came true. I always wanted to see you, but you were too busy. Just because we had an Italian student stay in our house for month, we decided to go to Italy to see him. My mother wrote to you about our trip to Italy. Then we came to know that you also would visit to Italy. What a coincidence! My mother was supposed to see you in Italy, but she couldn’t. I didn’t think I could go there by myself. Only the desire to see you and Mo-Li made me to decide to

do that. To tell the truth, it was not as hard than I expected. Soon I found Japanese company, so my trip alone was pretty good. Except the plane was delayed.



Nodoka would have another visit with Claude, this time in America

While I was heading to the hotel at which you and Mo-Li stayed, I was so nervous and scared. I wondered what if I couldn't see you. When I arrived the hotel where you stayed, I couldn't see you anywhere. I asked a woman at the front like this, "I'm supposed to meet my friends in this hotel." First she looked very grumpy, but she smiled at me and said to me, "Mr. & Mrs. Bamberger, right?" I nodded. Then she said, "Well, their plane is delayed, please sit down in the sofa." While I was waiting, it seemed impossible to meet you and Mo-Li. Finally,

someone came into the hotel and asked the woman at the front something. There you and Mo-Li were, standing with joy and happiness. I'll never forget that moment. It was wonderful. People whom I only knew from letters and pictures were actually standing in front of me. I was overwhelmed, so I almost started to cry.

We were talking like teenage girls. Then we decided to go out to have lunch. I told you about a stupid mistake, which I made in that morning. I ordered a waiter. "Can I have a cappuccino with milk." I wish you were there and could see his face. He was more embarrassed than I was. As you knew I did much better than last time I order cappuccino! On that night, I couldn't sleep with excitement and joy and happiness.

On the very next day, we went so many museums and places. You explain everything you know about them. You are brilliant. I don't know how you could remember so many things in your brain. I could never do that. If there is any way to do that, please tell me.

The time to say good-bye was gradually coming up. You don't know how I deeply wish time long last forever. My wish was in vain. The time had come, I don't remember what I said to you, but I definitely know I could have said something nicer.

For two days you and Mo-Li took care of me as family. I don't know how to thank you. If my mother didn't correspond to your secretary's son, we couldn't get to know each other. It is the last thing I want to think about. Life without you and Mo-Li, it is disaster. I've got to say thank you to my mother who introduced me to you."

Nodoka would later spend time in England, taking a course in teaching Japanese to English speakers. While there, she also took Karate lessons and resolved that Karate would be her hobby in the future. She was struck how, while not too many Japanese are into Karate, people in England are interested in oriental things like the martial arts."

All in all, Nodoka remembers Claude as, "my best friend and listener and adviser and dear American grandfather."



"My name is Seiko Tomita. I was born in Maebashi-city, Gunma Prefecture on January 15, 1949. I'm sort of old now, but my spirit is still 23. I'd been a private English teacher for 16 years/ but now I teach the tea ceremony once a week. I started teaching the tea ceremony several years earlier than I started teaching English.



On having an operation for sigmoid colon cancer, I decided to lead an easy life and quit teaching English, and train myself to deepen my tea ceremony. But English meant a lot to me, I'm one of the baby-boomers. In those days when I started learning English at 10, television was full of America. As I watched programs like *Surfside 6*, *Papa Knows Best*, *Rawhide*, *Wagon Train*, *Laramy* and so on, I was attracted by America. That's why English became the subject I like best.

I enjoyed writing to a pen pal named Robin in Australia or singing the Beatles songs every day. Though I used to be passive and diffident, studying English gradually changed me into a positive girl.

At such time Mr. Bamberger came to our school to talk with the members of Overseas Pen Pal Club. That was the most exciting event in my junior high school days. I had imagined what Mr. Bamberger might look like and hoped it was like Troy Donahugh. I was only twelve. I wrote later that I envied Noriko and Hiroko and wished I was as close as they were.

After that I went to Hosei University in Tokyo. and majored in English and American literature. I liked to become friends with foreigners and to be kind to them. So I sometimes show them the tea ceremony and explain Japanese culture or give foreign students lodging or teach Japanese.



I got married on April 13, 1998, when I was 48. Years have passed since then. I trust him and feel that we're still newly-married. He has three children of 24, 22 and 20 years old. Their mother died in a traffic accident in 1994. I'm their stepmother.

The eldest son, Yuusuke, lives with us and is a student of the medical department. The second son Tsunaki studies education in Tokyo, and the youngest daughter Maki studies the science of nursing in Niigata. They are gentle and good children, but it takes time to know each other inside out.

The Pen Pal memoir you wrote inspired me to write an autobiography of my father, who had two factories where the bodies of heavy and light trucks are manufactured. He was born in Fujimi Village to the "north of Maebashi on January 26, 1914. He lived to be 88. His life was successful. He came from a poor family and went through hardships as a youth, but he was a hard worker and highly resourceful, considerate and modest. He was also a good father. I miss him. I sent Claude his autobiography as a token of our friendship."



Teruo Sakanishi wrote the following for the occasion of Claude's birthday:

"Telephone calls from Noriko and Hiroko Ichikawa reminded me of those heart-warming happenings of old in 1961. They sent to me your book, Pen Pal, which I enjoyed reading very much and I adored your correct memory for events long since history.

In 1961, when you visited Maebashi City, I was an English teacher at a High School attached to Gunma University. Both Noriko and Hiroko were brilliant and active students at school, especially in my English classes.

I appear in your Pen Pal book as "a youngish Japanese teacher of English." The teacher really looks quite young at the right on page 16! He's now over 72 years old. It was my deep regret that I had not been a talented interpreter at the Ichikawa home and also at the meeting of the International Pen Pal Club.

Your book taught me your deep love for all the members of the Ichikawa family, including the ones who have passed on. I believe the Pen Pal Club students in the same picture would be sure to express their heartfelt thanks for your giving them a big opportunity of mutual understanding between the U. S. and Japan.

Three years after I met you, I was transferred from the Attached School to the Board of Education of Gunma Prefecture. It was the

beginning of my long office life. I began with the work of supervisor, and after that became section and division chief, dean, superintendent and so on. And last July I retired as president of Gunma Prefectural Lifelong Learning Center. Now I am completely free from an office job and spend my days in reading books and gardening."



Mo-Li didn't like the part about Teruo (above center) thinking he had not been a talented interpreter. She reminded him that the Pen Pal group he shepherded blossomed into "a new friendship club!" She even put it more forcibly: "It is YOU who helped open the window to a new world for Claude."



Since his visit to Maebashi city in 1961, Claude also heard from other members of the Pen pal Club.

On August 2000, Ikuko Kanda (Watanabe) wrote to Claude:

"It was a big surprise when I heard about you from Noriko a few days ago. Do you remember the Pen Pal Club in Maebashi City? I was a member of Pen Pal Club. And I saw you first the high school in the conference room and went to take pictures from the roof of the school. You helped me to talk to a foreigner without shame. Your story made a deep impressions on me when I was a young girl. Thank

you from the bottom of my heart for visiting Maebashi City and have a chance to meet you.

I introduce myself simply. My name is Ikuko Kanda. I married about twenty seven years ago. When I met you, I was fourteen years old. I'm one of Noriko's friends. I'm very happy to hear your name and nice to hear you and memories with Ichikawa's family.

I have four children, two girls and two boys.

I tell them about you. They are very surprised for your story and interested in my younger days. I'm very happy for getting a chance to meet you."



Claude also received a letter from Sanae Kodaka on September 2000. She wrote:

"I'm sure it is sizzle in Maebashi City. I was very glad to hear from you after a long distance.

I saw some pictures of my dear friends. I recall all those wonderful days that passed. To me, at age 41, Mr. Bamberger is a very dandy, handsome looking, attractive man. I'm terribly sorry, it seems I don't remember anything. My memory is horrible. I'm jealous and happy to know that Mr. Bamberger and Hiroko still keep in touch, I hope he will be in good health and enjoy his life as long as possible."



Upon his return to the United States, Claude received a newspaper article dated 1961 about his visit to the International Pen pal Club in Maebashi city.

Translated from the Japanese Newspaper:

"Just after 1 pm in the afternoon, we the students of Fuzoku Junior High School in Maebashi city, Japan, were so excited to see a guest from America., Mr. Claude Bamberger. We had no idea what he was like except that he was a male. Was he a student or perhaps an old man? With hope and anticipation, he finally arrived. It was 2 pm. Some one gave a shout, "The car is here!"

We ran down the stairs from the 3rd floor to the ground floor. He seemed at age 40, a father-like figure. We sat down around him. We were so excited.

Mr. Bamberger started speaking. He spoke slowly but we could not understand his whole speech. So our teachers, Mr. Sakanishi and Mr. Tamura translated for us. Mr. Bamberger said, 'I feel like President Kennedy, surrounded by the press and being interviewed'.

We started to introduce ourselves to him. He listened to each introduction and asked questions. Sometimes the classroom was filled with smiles and laughter. The whole conversation was recorded on tape for memory. We were ecstatic that we could actually communicate with a native English speaker.

Mr. Bamberger told us he owned his own plastics company. He traveled around the world to purchase scrap plastic for recycling and resale. He told us he loved skiing and enjoy visiting Switzerland every year. He was very sorry to miss seeing our famous Nikko skiing area during his short visit to Japan.

We asked him what American students were like. He answered that they were like us! He asked us if we go on dates. We said, NO! NO!" We sang school songs and some folk songs. He seemed to enjoy them."

Friendship Sometimes Surprises Itself