

# MIDTERM REPORT

JULY 2005



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**INTERNSHIP AT: METTLER TOLEDO K.K., TOKYO**

**TIME IN JAPAN: NOVEMBER 2004 – DECEMBER 2005**

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## Introduction

The Midterm Report is primarily to fulfil the requirements set by the Scholarship Fund of the Swiss-Japanese Chamber of Commerce. Therefore, it is information to the Chairman of the Scholarship Fund, Mr. Dudler about the first half of my stay in Japan. At the same time, it is a means to say thank you for the invaluable support through the Scholarship Fund. As a completion to my monthly letters I would like to use this report to say thank you to Mr. Lang and Ms. Bellano of Mettler Toledo in Switzerland who have been regarding my application with favour since our very first contact. Also, the report is aimed at future scholarship recipients. Still in Switzerland I was very much enjoying other scholarship recipients' reports and they were a great support for my own preparations. Finally, this report will be the basis for my End Report in December.

The report includes chapters on organizational issues, the school term, the internship and other stories. In order to make the reading easier I use the introduction to explain my affinity for Japan.

My interest in Japan evoked while I was studying English in London in 2002 during the spring semester of my second year at the University of St. Gallen. I met a couple of Japanese that were of such an interesting and kind personality that I wondered what kind of culture they live in. Back in Switzerland I took up studies of the Japanese language and when I entered my Major in International Relations half a year later I focused on Japan-related economic and political issues. In 2003 I swapped my studies in St. Gallen with a three-month stay in Tokyo to test my theoretical knowledge in reality. At that time I had already submitted my application to the Scholarship Fund. In May 2004 I was interviewed by Mr. Dudler and granted the Fund's support. Being my goal very close I wanted to be back in Japan as soon as possible and felt confident enough to prepare my graduation test and at the same time find an internship. The plan was to graduate in September, start the language study in November and the internship in April. After having applied at a number of companies I was given the chance to do the internship at Mettler Toledo in Tokyo and the plan was to become true.



## Settling in Japan

### Visa Application Process

Other Scholarship recipients' reports contain plenty of useful information about the visa and bank account issue and apparently there are as many ways to get a visa of whatever kind as scholarship recipients submit an application. Of course, I would like to add my own one but concerning the visa issue preparation in Switzerland I recommend consulting the list of necessary items on page three and four in Ms. Küng's End report. I made my preparations in Switzerland relying on that list, too, and felt very well prepared for the visa applying process in Japan.

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I have to admit that still in Switzerland I was somewhat concerned about how to apply for the visa. To calm down I made a couple of calls to the Japanese embassy in Bern. However, I wouldn't consider their information very reliable but at least I learned that with only one or two more months until my departure in November I had no other choice than applying for the Certificate of Eligibility in Japan and change it into the proper visa afterwards. Therefore, I entered Japan with no beforehand visa application in Switzerland and was issued a landing permission with the status Temporary Visitor, valid for three months upon arrival at Narita Airport (the so-called Tourist Visa). Concerning the flight ticket I opted for a return flight ticket because I was told to change the status of residence in Switzerland and also because I was told that when entering Japan as a tourist I might be asked to either produce a return air ticket or be prompted to buy one at the airport.

In my case, it was very easy to extend the Temporary Visitor Visa. Due to my place of domicile I was asked to apply for the extension at the Regional Immigration Office in Tachikawa. Apart from the long waiting time (ca. four hours) because the

Immigration Office was understaffed (three immigration officers) regarding the number of visitors to Japan (ca. one hundred) I spent a quiet afternoon in Tachikawa. By the way, I was advised by the staff of my language school not to mention my future application for changing the status of residence because it would only cause unnecessary questions. However easy it was this time I would like to stress that I had much more difficulties at the Immigration Office in Shinagawa when I extended my Temporary Visitor Visa in 2003.

On my first visit to Mettler Toledo in Tokyo I was told that the application for my visa will be handled by a law firm. Two months before the start of my internship I was asked by the law firm to submit certain documents in order to apply for the Certificate of Eligibility and I submitted all documents that I brought from Switzerland. About six weeks later I was informed that I was issued the original Certificate of Eligibility and that the law firm will instantly submit an Application for Change of Status of Residence. All I had to do was signing and returning the documents that the law firm prepared and submit my passport. Some weeks later I received my passport including the new visa, status Specialist in Humanities/International Services valid for one year. After all the qualms I had about the visa issue I was proud to have risen from an ordinary tourist to a licensed specialist.

## **BANK ACCOUNT**

Again, please refer to the list on page four of Ms. Küng's End Report. I proceeded according to her list and had absolutely no problems to open an account at the Bank of Tokyo-Mitsubishi.

銀行

## **REGISTRATION AT THE WARD OFFICE**

Registration at the local ward office is necessary three times, not including changes of address. After arrival in Japan registration is necessary in order to be issued the Certificate of Alien Registration, what will be a foreigner's ID in Japan. After the extension of the tourist visa and after the change of the status of residence it is a must to register the changes again. I had some difficulties to register my change of status of residence because I was asked to show my work contract or my

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business card, which I was not yet given at that time. As I didn't bring my work contract and as it was much too early to call somebody in the office I was forced to go to the Ward office a second time.

## ACCOMMODATION

I am presently staying at a Gaijin House in Higashi-Koganei, where I lived during my first stay in 2003 already. At the very beginning of my first stay I participated at a student forum at the Hitotsubashi University in the West of Tokyo and the Gaijin House was recommended to me as acceptable and reasonable in price. Being very pleased with this accommodation I opted to stay at the same place during the present stay for some time again and look for more convenient accommodations once I arrived in Japan. Eight months later I am still living there.

外人ハウス

The main message about my room is short and similar to my status of residence it knows two statuses only: It is either bloody cold or tropically hot. I support Benjamin Hartmann in his comment on spending a winter in a Gaijin House: It is just terrible. The reasons why I stay there nevertheless is that my room is cheap, equipped with a fridge, a TV, free internet connection and air-conditioning (not free).

About fifty percent of the Gaijin House residents are Japanese and fifty percent foreigners. Unfortunately, the situation concerning my fellow residents changed somewhat during the last months. There is not much good I can say about my neighbours. Roughly, fifty percent of the inhabitants are nice and fifty percent are annoying, being noisy and arousing the neighbourhood's anger. Sadly, almost all foreigners are among the fifty percent annoying persons. As a consequence, I try to stick to the Japanese and keep an eye open for other accommodations.

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## SCHOOL TERM

### FINDING A LANGUAGE SCHOOL

Again, I relied on my experience from my first stay in Japan. When at that time I decided to study Japanese in Tokyo I didn't know anybody who could recommend me a language school. I checked a number of schools in the internet but it was difficult to evaluate which school fits my needs best. As a consequence I decided to leave Switzerland without booking the language school in advance. Instead I planned to see a couple of schools that seemed most appropriate after having checked their homepages in the internet. Being closest to my accommodation Kichijoji Language School (KLS) was school number one to be visited. I had a couple of interviews and meetings with the school staff and every time I was taken care of as a real customer and received detailed advise on how to study Japanese. My impression was such that I didn't want to see the other schools anymore and decided to study Japanese at KLS. Looking back I would not want to miss knowing the classrooms, some of the teachers and the atmosphere at school before I sign and pay a contract for a three months language education. For this reason I chose KLS again for this time's study.

入学



### PRIVATE LESSONS

Joining classes in November is not a perfect timing because courses are already in their midterms. Therefore I chose to have 50-minutes private lessons every day until the end of the year and to join regular classes afterwards. During this six-weeks term of private lessons I studied with the second-level class book (Minna no Nihongo II, みんなの日本

語 II) that continued the studies from my first stay in Japan. To set up an overall study plan for my private classes I was asked to formulate a study goal and the head teacher then suggested a daily study plan, basing on the textbook I wanted to use. Knowing exactly what was going to be the program everyday I prepared the grammar by myself before the lessons. With the more or less self-explaining Minna no Nihongo as a basis we used almost all of the 50 minutes for conversation training, applying the new grammar. Additionally, I studied Kanjis completely by myself.

## CLASSES & CLASSMATES

Beginning in mid-January until mid-March I attended the third level morning classes (class book: Shin Nihongo no Chukyu, 新日本語の中級). I studied with a British, Chinese, Russian, French and three Americans. My fellow students had different backgrounds and motivations but those that turned up daily studied ambitiously. I especially admired the effort of an American couple, of whom the man is with the U.S. Air Force. As KLS is the U.S. Air Force's contract partner for their language training in Tokyo KLS always has some Air Force personal among their students. Those students do their preparation for different services in Japan and stay up to a year at KLS. My fellow student will start studying at a Japanese Self-Defence Force's university from August and hopefully we will continue to meet regularly. Classes on the intermediate level also included extra essay writing and reading comprehension that is not satisfactory included in the Shin Nihongo no Chukyu. Also, studying Kanjis was included in classes. In contrast to my private lessons teachers used much more time for explaining the grammar.

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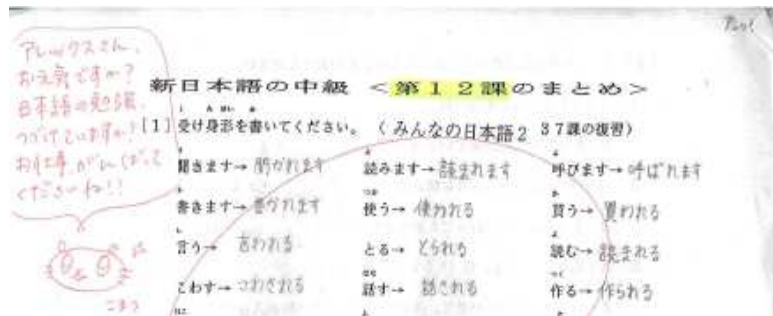


Fellow graduates at KLS

### TEACHERS

With five different teachers, one for every weekday and all women, we had to get used to different voices and teaching styles. Generally, I would say that rather older teachers are better teachers, because they put more weight on those exercises that serve the students' needs best. Younger teachers, in contrast, rather tended to uniformly follow the school program. On the other hand, the younger

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Teachers knew exactly how much we liked their drawings

teacher, not surprisingly, provided more information about what is going on in Tokyo while the older ladies are excellent teachers of Japanese etiquette and customs. The school staff was not only teaching language but also how to fit into the Japanese way of life. Everyday we had plenty of opportunity to practice the little formalities that make human relations<sup>1</sup> in Japan a little bit different from personal relations in Switzerland.

### RECAPITULATING THE SCHOOL TERM

Both private lessons and classes have advantages and disadvantages. I learned faster and more efficient in private lessons than in classes; not to mention the opportunity to have real conversations in private lessons. However, who likes to be without classmates for five months? Certainly not me and I changed to regular classes, which meant less efficiency but more friends. The prices for five weeks daily 50-minutes private lessons and five weeks daily 210-minutes classes are about the same.

学生生活

During my five months school term I had classes or private lessons in the morning and spent the afternoons studying in the local Community Centre's study room. In between I enjoyed lunch at one of the countless cheap restaurants in Kichijoji. Frankly speaking, I am a real fan of Community Centres and the ladies at the reception were willing victims of my poor Japanese. Furthermore, tables are not of the size of a kitchen

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<sup>1</sup> Note that my visa status (Specialist in Humanities) is a wonderful description of what students at KLS are educated to.

chop board and the temperature is normally above zero, two invaluable selling points for a Gaijin House resident. Studying from Monday to Friday I felt confident enough to save the weekends for other pleasures.

Learning at KLS was more than being a mere student. Rather, I felt like a customer. Well, that is not a surprising statement on Japan but nevertheless I think it is remarkable when teachers make inquiries in detailed questions<sup>2</sup> and extend 50-minutes private lessons to 80-minutes lessons without any extra charge. Besides, I loved the free KLS-coffee service in the morning.



Receiving my graduation certificate from the school principal

## THE JAPANESE LANGUAGE – MY APPROACH

As in my view the grammar in Japanese language is not as difficult as in other languages most of the time of studying Japanese is consumed by memorizing all different parts of the language: grammar, vocabulary, verb forms, hiragana, katakana and our loved Kanjis. Therefore, studying Japanese is rather a question of effort and practice than of intelligence, though a little bit more intelligence might have been of use in my case. Fortunately, I visited Mr. Reinfried's Japanese classes during my university time and thus knew quite a bit of all the parts mentioned above. I don't think I could have taken in all the information we had to learn everyday at KLS if I didn't have the bases from my time at university. I strongly recommend all future participants to start memorizing the parts above as early as possible in Switzerland, if possibly with Mr. Reinfried's excellent text book.

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During classes I was hardly able to memorize what I was expected to memorize and in the afternoon I tried to catch up with everything that left my mind during lunch time. After some weeks I recognized that it is much more efficient to focus on only a part of the new language. Knowing the daily time at disposal for homework and review I

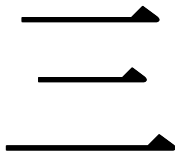
<sup>2</sup> My Air Force friend, preparing his future studies, was interested in spelling words such as preventive warfare etc; of course including Kanjis.

chose a set of new vocabulary and Kanjis and repeated it day after day until I knew it by heart. Once I finished this set, I chose a new set and so on. I applied the same system when doing reviews. With that method I was able to memorize at least a part of the program. Yes, it was only a part of the program but that part I really memorized. And that is better than trying to memorize thirty new words every second day and knowing nothing in the end.

Having conversations is probably the most important part of studying a language. Therefore, I everyday tried to have a short dialogue with somebody I don't know. Normally, I turned to one of Kichijoji's shop assistant. I can't say who was more confused; me or the shop assistant but after she or he recognised that I made an attempt at talking Japanese it got much better. The 1000-Yen hairdresser is another...but see section four for that story.

It is my persuasion that focusing on speeding up the use of easy language is much better than studying additional complex language on the expense of conversation speed. Nevertheless, the grammar studied before starting the internship should be sufficient to enable easy conversations. In other words, finding the perfect mix between review and new issues is very important, though it was not so easy for me. Work in Japan will then hopefully offer plenty of conversation practice, basing on what has been studied so far. Consequently, the broader the base from school the better the results at work but I don't think that many of us have enough time to take in new grammar while working.

Since I started work I am even more convinced that with Minna no Nihongo I and II completely memorized daily conversation in Japanese is easily possible. Unfortunately, it says *completely memorized* and I can't say that I have no problems in conversation. Even for conversations at work I think that the language taught in these two books is sufficient. The only parts I regularly review from *Shin Nihongo no Chukyu*, the intermediate level textbook, are those that deal with situations at the office. Also, I complete my vocabulary with words and Kanjis that we daily use at the office.



## AT WORK

### FINDING AN INTERNSHIP

From Mr. Dudler's approval of my scholarship application until my planned departure date I had roughly half a year time to find an internship. The first contact I had with possible employers was in April 2004 at the Forum HSG, a job fair at the University of St. Gallen. Though I had many contacts with companies present at the forum only two companies offered useful support beyond *please check our career-website*. Mettler Toledo was one of these two serious companies.

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The forum taught me two lessons. Firstly, smaller companies and among students less renowned companies offer more individual support than the big ones. For any reasons, most students focus on the very big players and their booths are so crowded that conversations with their representatives are impossible. However, when I finally managed to grasp one of their representatives I got such useless information as the already mentioned *please check our career-website* or *we only offer marketing-internships to marketing students that have done a marketing-internship already*. What simple view on the complex life of a student. Big is beautiful is true concerning the booth's outfit but not necessarily concerning the job prospects. In contrast, smaller companies booths', and though I wouldn't consider Mettler Toledo a small company I am also talking about Mettler Toledo, attract less students and therefore offer the better chance to place one's bid. My internship-in-Japan approach was very welcomed among their representatives. Secondly, I learned that instead of applying at any company it is more effective to first check out the chances at different companies and then focus on those that show an interest in my request.

Among the other ways of finding an internship in Japan are, first, get in contact with Scholarship Alumni and find out their internship company, including the responsible person, second, contact the SJCC's members in Japan, and finally, keep an

eye on information on Japan related issues. I never relied on fortune as a last saviour but after all: fortune is fortunate to the ambitious.

## METTLER TOLEDO

As April 2004 was too early for applying for an internship beginning in April 2005 I was asked to submit my application not before August. To be honest, I was not sure at that time if that was an attempt to get rid of my extraordinary request (as so many other company representatives attempted) or a matter of facts. However, the person I talked to at the forum still remembered me and my request when I submitted my application in August and I was soon invited for an interview at Mettler Toledo's headquarter in Greifensee. The interview day was just the day after my last graduation test day and therefore the end of a very exhausting three month period of studying for the graduation tests and sitting tests during day time and doing the internship research in the evening. Tired but happy to be given the chance to explain my Japan project I met both the contact person from the Forum HSG and the Asian Region Manager. During the three-hours talk I got an overview of Mettler Toledo's business and was asked to explain my motivation, intention and preparation for the internship in Japan, including the Scholarship Fund's role. Two days later, the General Manager of Mettler Toledo Japan agreed to my application, too. This was the final approval to start the internship with Mettler Toledo.

Mettler Toledo is the world's largest manufacturer of weighing instruments for use in laboratory, industrial and food retailing applications. In Japan, Mettler Toledo has approximately one hundred employees.

## ENTRY INTO METTLER TOLEDO JAPAN

Once in Japan I visited Mettler Toledo's office in Tokyo in December and March. A couple of issues had to be discussed with the persons responsible in Japan before the start of the internship, most important being the visa issue. Of course, these two meetings were also used to talk about the work I was going to do in the internship.

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From the beginning I felt very comfortable and welcomed at Mettler Toledo Japan. Apart from one foreigner, who I never had the chance to meet yet, all employees are Japanese. Apparently a fact that seems to be frightening from a Japanese point of view as the interviewers in Japan assured me that there was no reason to worry about that. In fact, I was not frightened but happy about working in such a company. After all it was my intention to acquire occupational experience in a Japanese setting, and what could be more Japanese than one hundred percent Japanese among my co-workers? However, such statements in my first interview made me having second thoughts about my confidence. Fortunately, my non-existing worries were eased by assuring me that a good part of the employees were fairly good English speakers. And I was advised to especially address the young women if I had any problems because they are the most skilled English speakers. That was a nice recommendation and cheered me up again.

## EXPECTATIONS

Up to this day I have been working at Mettler Toledo Japan for roughly three months but I feel like having gone to my workplace for a much a longer time. This is not to express tiredness of my occupation, not at all. Rather, I feel very much integrated and don't think I could be happier at any other place.

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The fact that, with the exception of one American, all employees are Japanese increased my expectations towards the improvement of my Japanese. Also, I expected to learn a lot about teamwork with people of other cultures. Of course, this is presently the Japanese culture but with an eye to my future I hope to learn dealing with people of other cultures in general. Additionally, I had two more expectations concerning the work. Firstly, it was and still is my intention to focus on and increase my knowledge of one area within the company, which is the Finance Department. Secondly, I would like to know about the other departments of the company as well as about the global functioning of Mettler Toledo.

## WORK

Already on my first day at Mettler Toledo I saw both of my cultural expectations fulfilled. With no exception, everybody was talking Japanese with me. And the welcome lunch for the two of us new employees joining the department offered plenty of opportunity for socializing. Of course, work had to be done, too. I have been placed in the Logistics Group for the first two weeks where I had first contacts with the company's ERP-System, order processing and ... frequently used Kanjis. Up to that day the most complex combination of Kanjis I used were those for Tokyo Metropolitan Government (東京行政) or ~Ltd. (~株式会社) and the long rows of Kanjis written on the freight papers I was working with were absolutely undecipherable.

仕事

Two weeks later I was moved to the Finance Department and assigned to the intercompany settlement where I was confronted with more English. To my surprise the work is rather simple from an accounting point of view but the true challenge is to manage the ERP-system correctly. My work consists of two parts mainly: On the one hand I am doing the routine intercompany work, roughly five to six days in a month, and on the other hand I am dealing with the intercompany work process. This assignment has two parts again. First, I am putting the process of the Intercompany Settlement on a more efficient basis and second I am arranging a manual to explain and define the Intercompany Settlement work flow.

I hope to be assigned additional tasks soon because the present work occupies less and less time.

## WORKPLACE & COMMUTING

Mettler Toledo's Japan head office is located at the Ryutsu-Centre. Ryutsu-Centre is a rather unpretentious warehouse area close to Haneda Airport. It has three characteristics: warehouses, trucks, and bustle (but not the classy one from Ginza).

I have a fairly long way of ninety minutes to work both in the morning and the evening, using the Chuo Line, Yamanote Line and Monorail. I have been warned more than once that such a commuting time might well be more

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strenuous than the actual work I am doing during the day. However, it took about the same time to travel from my hometown Winterthur in Switzerland to the University of St. Gallen. And I developed some methods to survive Tokyo rush hours. I chose the 10 minutes longer route via Tokyo station instead of going with the Yamanote Line to Shinjuku. Tokyo as the Chuo Line's final station is very convenient because I can easily get a seat on the forty-five-minute ride back to Higashi-Koganei. As it proved to be the only opportunity to study Japanese it is very precious time. In the morning I get on the train through the same doors every day in order to be pushed out of the train right next to the staircase at Hamamatsucho station. Hamamatsucho is the worst of all stations I have ever used in Tokyo. When the Yamanote Line and Tohoku Line arrive at the same time the tiny platform is swarmed with commuters pushing towards the staircase.

Whenever I mention the Chuo Line I am asked two questions, and both don't cheer me up. The first question is: Do you know that the Chuo Line attracts the biggest number of suicides among all Tokyo train lines? Second question is: Isn't the Chuo Line the most crowded of all Lines? Sadly, the answer to both questions is yes.

Almost all of my co-workers spend a lot of time commuting between their homes in payable areas out of the centre and the office in the centre. Bearing that in mind I am even more surprised that it is absolutely no question for anybody in our office to continue work till late on busy days. I have never heard any complaints and I admire my co-workers' attitude. Probably, overwork is accepted at our company because it is not forced on us. Nobody is staying in the office after the official work time ended if there is no work to do. Overwork is done because work has to be done but it is never a means to itself. I would say that in our department up to one hour of overwork is done per day and employee. At the beginning I was offered to leave when the official work time ended but that made me feel uncomfortable, with most of my co-workers still being at work. As I was never assigned urgent work during the first two or three weeks of my internship I was forced to leave when my superiors stopped assigning work to me in the evening. However, I found some ways to be busy until later so that I was not the first one to leave. After I was assigned to the Intercompany Settlement the situation changed and I became really busy so that the time I leave is about in average with the other employees' clock out time.

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The overtime issue seems to very present. Talking with my Japanese friends, among whom many have family, I hear many complaints about husbands coming back

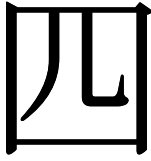
home late and completely exhausted, not able to contribute to a happy family life. Also, some of them regularly work six days a week, hardly ever seeing their children. I am not surprised that many young people prefer less demanding part-time jobs to permanent employment just to keep some private life beside work life.



Entrance to the Ryutsu-Centre office building.



One of Ryutsu-Centre's huge warehouses, where Mettler Toledo's warehouse is located, too.



## LIFE IN JAPAN

### A NORMAL WORKING DAY

The title is maybe a slight overstatement. I am not sure if I would consider any working day in Japan normal. Anyhow, I normally get up at a quarter to seven. Since spring time I need an alarm clock to wake up on time. In winter, during my school term, I didn't need any help to wake up because it was so cold that I couldn't sleep anymore anyway. At about twenty past seven I leave my room and go to the station. There is not much traffic in my town and trains leave in two minutes intervals so that I normally have no need to hurry and have breakfast while riding the bike. From about half past seven until half past eight I endure commuting in a train that I actually consider full when it arrives at my station and before all other Higashi-Koganei citizens push into it. Before arriving at Ryutsu-Centre where our office is located I enjoy the ten minutes ride in the Monorail. I normally get a seat and the morning view on the Rainbow Bridge and the harbour area is great. At twelve I join a couple of my co-workers and hundreds of other *salariman* from the Ryutsu-Centre for lunch at the obligatory twelve o'clock lunch time. About a third of the one hour lunchtime is consumed by waiting for the lift, walking a short way to the restaurant floor and queuing up at the restaurant. Back at the office I continue work till about seven. I often have dinner at a Ramen-shop or another inexpensive restaurant and it is close to half past nine when I arrive at my room.

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During my school term my Japanese friends often joked about my future as a *salariman*. And though I was sure that I won't end like that I have to admit that I am a *salariman*, too. I recently had *caree-raisu* with *icu-coohi* for lunch in the Ryutsu-

Centre's smoky *Kissaten*<sup>3</sup>. When I called out *suimase*n to get more ice-water I startled upon myself and realised that this was the last step in the transformation that my friends predicted. Would that may be justify the title?

## HOSPITALITY (AND FLATTERIES)

Talking about *salariman* reminds me of my family's and friend's reaction to the emails I am regularly sending home. Many of the experiences and little stories I am writing to Switzerland provoke reactions like *really?* or *Is it true?* and *I thought completely different about Japanese*. First of all: yes, it is normally true. But their ideas about Japanese are probably a little bit wrong, though I would not say that the prejudices are very bad prejudices. No, rather so good that the prejudices make Japanese somewhat boring. Of course, I do my best to change the prejudices among my family and friends but however wrong the prejudices might be for me, being among Japanese in Japan, they might be true concerning Japanese being abroad. And that is where prejudices come up.

Generalising prejudices are never a very adequate means to approach a nation and it is especially inadequate in the case of Japan. Nevertheless, I would like to do one: Visitors to Japan will meet superb hospitality. Everybody I meet seems to have one goal: to make the foreigner's stay in Japan as comfortable as possible. And sooner or later one question will arise: *Do you like to be in Japan?* When I normally reply that Japan is a wonderful country my companions' satisfaction and pride seem endless, though my comment is redeemed with a surprised *really?* at first. Normally some objections follow why Japan is a bad place. But I don't think these objections are really serious. Rather, they intend to provoke more compliments. Of course, I do my best to confute all of these fake-objections until the other side capitulated and we can praise Japan together. I am still as much impressed about the Japanese conception of their own country as I was when I had my first dinner with Japanese people some years ago.

Japanese people's pride on Japan is one phenomenon in Japan that strikes me. The art of praising and flattering is another one. There is nothing, and be it however poor, that isn't subject of abundant praising. Everybody is praising my Japanese even before I said a single word in Japanese. My ability to use chopsticks is praised when I unwrap the chopsticks from their paper packaging.

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<sup>3</sup> Kissaten: restaurant/coffee where the anti-smoking movement is unknown.

Sometimes I am even praised for talking English like a native when I actually talk Japanese. Teachers at school developed sophisticated methods to cheer us up even our texts in Japanese couldn't be recognised as such. Fortunately, one of the lessons in our text book at school was *Praising · Humbling oneself* (褒める · けんそんする). After we studied that lesson's grammar and vocabulary we stroke back and praised our teachers that their faces got red as a beetroot.

## THE 1000-YEN HAIRDRESSER

There is one place in Tokyo where I sometimes doubt my prejudice. My hair, or more precisely the ones that I am lacking, is a frequent subject in conversations with Japanese. I don't know how many times I have been told that I should eat more *nori* (seaweed) or *wakame* (big seaweed) because it is said to be very healthy for the hair. Though it is really tasty it didn't help my hair yet.

Nevertheless, I need a haircut then and when and I always have it cut at QB, the 10-minutes hairdresser. QB's shops are tiny and have two to four hairdressers. Apparently, QB is very popular and I always have to queue up. At my first visit at QB's I felt nothing strange when just when it was my turn the hairdresser who finished another customer's haircut left the shop to have a break. And the next one did so, too. At least one of the hairdressers has to stay in the shop and I could finally get my haircut. But when the same happened again at my next visit at QB I couldn't resist thinking that they are running away because of me. I thought to practice Japanese with QB's hairdressers but actually I have to be grateful for one of them staying in the shop with me.

## TIME OFF

Since I came to Japan eating and sightseeing became my hobbies. And that's how I mainly spend weekends and holidays.

I challenge everything and like most but I still don't consider sea urchin (*Seeigel*, うに), fermented beans (fermentierte Bohnen, なつと) and raw and salted tuna giblets (rohe, gesalzene Thunfisch-Innereien) to be food.

Unfortunately, it is very easy in Japanese restaurants to put one's foot in it and some of

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my most embarrassing experiences in Japan happened in restaurants. In one of these places, a sushi-bar, I was encouraged to order my own sushi from the sushi-master. After some resistance I gave in and asked for *anago* (eel, あなご). I knew that eel is not eaten raw but some kind of grilled eel is often served in sushi shops. I even knew that there are two kind of eel: *anago* (あなご) and *unagi* うなぎ, the one living in seawater only and the other in river and seawater. But even that is not sufficient knowledge because only うなぎ is eaten in sushi shops. Unfortunately, I opted for the wrong one. After I scared the sushi-master with my ignorance I was encouraged to have a second try and ordered salmon, hoping to be on the safe side with such a ordinary fish. That was bad again and my companion told me that salmon was a too poor fish to be served in such a place.

However, I coincidentally met the sushi-master when I went to Tsukiji-fish market for sightseeing on an early Friday morning. He even called out for me, while I was cursing my camera because it was not working anymore, and he didn't breath a word about the embarrassing story. I first wanted to ask him where to buy salmon but I thought it might be better just to listen to his explanations.

On the other hand, restaurants sometimes explain special Japanese features; for instance sliding doors. It was embarrassing to learn in front of a *Yoshinoya*<sup>4</sup> entrance that Japan knows three ways to open a door: Pull, push and slide. All the customers were watching me pushing and pulling the door until one of them pitied me and made a side wards move with his hands.

## OUTLOOK

Staying in Japan is an invaluable experience. Sadly, writing this report made me realising that this experience, at least within the *A year in Japan Program*, will come to an end, and that is frightening.

For the rest of my stay it is my primary objective to learn as much as possible at my workplace, including knowledge, work and intercultural experience. Sometimes, when I feel like being generous with myself I am happy with my Japanese. On other days, I blame myself for still being misunderstood

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<sup>4</sup> Popular restaurant to eat 牛丼 (ぎゅうどん); a bowl with rice, beef and onions.

when I order an アメリカンコーヒー (American coffee) at the coffee shop. Therefore, I will continue to have a daily goal concerning the Japanese language in order to make at least small improvements. For everything beside work and study I don't have to think about. Tokyo will do it.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Alex Schindler". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Alexander Schindler

Tokyo, 22 July 2005