Japanese Lessons

Benjamin, Gail R.

Published by NYU Press

Benjamin, Gail R.
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We timed our departure from Japan for just after the end of the school year in March. Sam and Ellen both received going-away presents from their classes, very nice photo albums with individual pictures of their classmates and a farewell note from each one. The inevitable hassles and confusions of ending the research we had come to do, of cleaning the apartment, selling household gear, closing bank accounts, and moving a family to the other side of the globe somewhat obscured the meaning and significance of the year for us in terms of our individual and family experiences at the time all this was going on.

Sam and Ellen were anxious to return to Pittsburgh. They had not been happy about moving from Washington, D.C., to Pittsburgh the year before, but the year in Japan made Pittsburgh seem like home. Remembered foods, TV shows, activities, and most importantly friends became common topics of conversation. All of us were looking forward to having a car again and a bigger house. All of us were ready to be back in an English-speaking environment; I feel print-deprived and stupid when I can’t read everything around me, and both Dave and I were tired of my being the only one who could ask questions, answer the phone, or read the mail. Dave and I were hoping we would again feel confident about our ability to handle the cultural and practi-
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The technical complexities of daily life. In Japan we had a perpetual impression that we were getting by on good luck and a distinctly below average level of social competence.

We also talked about the experiences we had enjoyed, the New Year’s trip to Hong Kong, travels throughout Japan, and especially the volcanoes, beaches, and hot spring baths in Kyushu. Strange foods we had encountered, and foods we would miss, also were remembered. Sam tried to figure out ways to take a lot of fireworks back to Pittsburgh. Ellen wanted to take the posters that helped her learn the syllabary and the first-grade kanji. The hardest part of leaving, of course, was parting from friends. Many people had helped us; many people we just enjoyed. Letters have helped us stay in touch, but they’re not like being in the same town and meeting casually.

Dave and I are sometimes asked if the year was worth it. Certainly in terms of our research it was fruitful and stimulating. The dynamics of the year together as almost the only Americans in Urawa, in a small apartment and without as many separate activities as we are involved in at home, meant we spent more time together, did more traveling and other activities together, and were more socially necessary to each other than when we are in the States. We both felt then, and now, that the experience of intimate contact with another culture was an invaluable one for our children. Sam, these several years later, seems to share this feeling more than Ellen. I think she was the one who enjoyed the year the least. Ellen and Sam both had conversation lessons with a tutor for two years after we returned, but that gave way to increasing academic and social demands. Sam studied Japanese with a tutor for his high school language requirements and retains some ability to use the language. He also shows a continuing interest in people of other cultural backgrounds and a flair for bringing disparate sorts of friends together.

Would we do it again? Would we recommend the same course to others? Yes.