

Host report: The Shinozake and Fukuda Host Families

Bobbie Groth

On Tuesday we met our host families in the lobby —my first family's mother was Makiko, who speaks very little English and I no Japanese, so it was at first a challenge to communicate. She has a phone app here she speaks what she wants into the phone, it translates into English, then says it out loud to me. Very clever, but not always understandable. I think I made them late to the evening activity, which I know is a big taboo, because I just didn't understand what she was trying to say to me—that it was time to go! We were going to the head of the dance school's house, which is where the men are staying. It was a lovely pot luck, and then the tables were cleared out of the way and the children came to perform. They asked us to perform to, but it was conveyed to me unclearly, and I did not have my foot support or my neck support with me, so it was very dreadful. Add onto that jet lag and I have a very sorrowful memory of that evening! Note to any future instrumentalists: make sure you have time TOGETHER to rehearse and warm up each day. It was deadly not having that because we were all staying in separate accommodations and there was no warm-up time planned before nearly all the performances.

My first host family consisted of Makiko Shinozake, her husband Shintaro, their daughter in the dance troop Honoka, their four year old daughter Arika, and their two year old son Toa. They live in a charming apartment complex with onsite parking, high outside corridors accessible by elevators. The apartment is very modern, sleek, and efficient with two bedrooms by the front door, a bath room, a toilet room, a Pullman kitchen opening into a dining room that holds a table but has the children's desk and toys and books on the perimeter, also a TV set. There is a traditional room with rattan floor and sliding walls. It stays open during the day and the children play there. At night the walls are shut and the futons spread about and all three children sleep there. The parents sleep in a bedroom off of that room next to the kitchen. Everything was very modern in terms of facilities, and the futons were so amazingly comfortable. I slept so well on them—what a change for me! I don't sleep that well at home on the bed!

Shintaro knew a little English and is a very gregarious person. He loves his car, and was eager to talk about all kinds of things. We did our best with the phone translator, and in no time I felt very comfortable there. I felt funny, because I am so used to helping in the kitchen and helping with children, but it appeared everyone was most comfortable when I sat and had my tea and was waited on!

The children were absolutely charming. It was my general observation that children are allowed to be children and are not glued to the television all the time. They are very polite while at the same time very nurtured and cuddled. The reserve on physical contact that adult Japanese have with each other is not in effect around children. The parents spent lots of time being affectionate to all their children, even the older girls, laughing and talking with them, cajoling the younger ones gently if they were balking at doing something. It is part of the extreme politeness, their way of correcting their children. I loved it. In the Shinozake household the four year old and two year old played a constant game of cat and mouse, laughing hilariously, chasing each other, giggling and falling all over each other. Neither parent told them to be quiet, but accepted their play as normal. It was very



Bobbie with Shinozake family: Bobbie, Honoke, Shintaro, Makiko, Arika, Toa



Fukuda family: Mina, Shiho and Kusashi

refreshing! Both parents dole out lots of kindness to their children. When Mama was busy with dinner in the kitchen then Honoka got out the origami papers and began to amuse her brother and sister. Then, when dinner was ready, they all three picked it up carefully and put it away—they didn't even have to be told. Before they did that, Makiko admired and praised their work. Honoka was a darling girl, right at her mother's elbow, helping the family through its routines—although if she was not happy, she would lean against her Mama or Papa while the situation was resolved.

Makiko was up by 5:00 am, ironing the children's school clothes. Honoka goes to a middle school, Arika goes to a "kindergarten" which is a daycare, Toa is cared for by his grandparents on a small farm at the edge of town. Both girls wear uniforms to school. Honoka was up early and was the first one out the door. Both parents said goodbye to her, and knocked on my door, expressing that she was leaving so I could say goodbye too. This was a morning ritual in both families, and very pleasant! Makiko has many things to do all day to care for her family. It seems that all children routinely start daycare/kindergarten at a very young age. Despite long hours of separation, the families are very devoted to each other and very close.

Even the first day I was there, Honoka tapped lightly on my door and served me my first tea of the morning on a little tray! This was my signal that the family was up. I had gotten up at 5 to take my shower as I didn't want to be in the way of their morning routines. When I came and sat at the dining table, Makiko introduced me the very first day to a home cooked, very sumptuous Japanese breakfast. They didn't have the typical western fare, but served about 5-6 different things in small bowls—fish, soup, eggs, vegetables, rice, meat—very much like a Japanese full lunch or dinner. It was wonderful. I love the taste of Japanese food, and I love the freshness. Makiko said they are fortunate to have the vegetables her parents grow, but it seemed to me that everything is based on fresh vegetables no matter where we were. The second morning it was Shintaro who tapped on my door and served me tea. I decided right then and there that I would adore being a grandmother in this culture!!

After all our activities on Thursday, my second host family picked me up at city hall and took me home to their house. I had met Mina, the mom, a few times, so that was great to see her as a familiar face. The Fukuda family consists of Mina, the wife, Kazushi, the husband, and their Junior High aged daughter Shiho. They also have a college age son, Shun'ichi who I did not meet, and an adult daughter, Misato, who was away traveling with her sheltered workshop group. The Fukuda family live in a beautiful house with a nice garden to one side, on a quiet street of like-houses. I was set up in the traditional room with the rattan floor for my bedroom, with my futon to be taken out each night. Once again it was very, very comfortable. There was also a sitting chair in that room which was good for me: I can sit on the floor, but I am not as adept at doing everything in a squatting position as my hosts! The Fukuda family congregates mostly in the room that is off the kitchen, which consists of a kitchen table, a couch, and a television. It was so pleasant to sit at the kitchen table and hear Mina and Shiho laughing at their work in the kitchen—once again I felt like a queen, as I was not to lift a finger, but to drink tea! Mina speaks some English, and it was fun to join in the laughter together! Despite language challenges, I had some conversations about our families with both my host mothers that I will very much treasure.

That first night we had an amazing sumptuous dinner, which was the pattern in their household. Mina laughs a lot, and it was a joy to hear her laughter—very friendly and comforting. Kazushi is a medical doctor at a nearby hospital, and true to form is more reserved and quiet. He expressed that he felt bad that he did not know any English, but by the second day he was a lot more smiley, so I guess he was getting used to me!! Shiho is a traditional dancer with the children's dance group. She is in junior high, and we saw her at one of our visits—she was one of our announcers! She shares her mother's eternally joyful demeanor and is very dedicated to her school. All of the children go to school on Saturday, when they study things like music, or kendo.

The second day I was there Mina discovered I like coffee, so she made me some—she drinks it too, apparently. It was so delicious. My last night on home-stay Mina made a wonderful sushi dinner with tempura—it was so amazing. We sat around and had a very good time together. I really like the Japanese format of so many foods.

I was told that you are supposed to have a certain number of essential tastes in each meal, because they satisfy your soul. That was certainly true! They do not seem to over-indulge like Americans do. Almost everyone we saw was slender and fit, and ate politely, and did not stuff themselves. It was all I could do not to eat everything in sight!

What we can learn from the Japanese and their culture is first of all efficiency in using up things or living—they have a very low consumption rate, and things are not stockpiled in the house like our Wal-Mart culture. There are no paper towels in public bathrooms and so people carry a little towel in their purse. What a great system! So much more sanitary!! In the midst of all the Japanese manufacturing economy, the people themselves have a very simple lifestyle—no accumulations of extra things. You bathe by filling a basin and soaping up from it, then rinsing under the hand held shower. If you like, you soak afterwards in a hot tub. Water is very conserved—many of the toilets run water through a little fountain on the top as the tank is filling, so you can wash your hands there. Then that water is what goes into the toilet bowl. Such a great idea. I was fortunate that both host families had western style toilets—I don't think my knees would get me up from the in-floor toilets! Toilet seats are heated! What a luxury to us!

The houses are all kept very cool, as energy is very expensive. I was so happy when I found this out because unlike most Americans we keep our house very cool, and I was so afraid I was going to be burning up. I was very comfortable all the time. Looking at their appliances and cars, I think I would rather have the Japanese ones—much more efficient use of space and energy. Gardens are very small, but quite beautifully cared for and productive of vegetables.

I liked the houses which were generally smaller than American homes, but there was much more efficient use of space, much less clutter, not ostentatious—very graceful, utilizing natural light, with a warm welcoming feeling of spaciousness. I became so agonizingly aware of how much we Americans waste, and how overblown our consumption of resources is. I knew this before, but I could see it in every way up close in Japan.

One other thing I noticed was different from our culture. First, how early the wife got up to begin preparing her family's clothes and food. But then, even in these two households with a stay at home mother and a father who worked long hours, when the father came home he would join right in to help with the children and the meal preparation. Then, at some moment when it was clear that dinner or breakfast was done being prepared, Papa was to sit down at the table and Mama and children brought him his tea and food in a way that honored him. I was put in that position of honor too. It was part of their immaculately polite home hospitality, and it was wonderful to be the recipient of that cultural tradition.

I have taken so many wonderful memories home from Japan, but my favorite ones are those of my host families and all the other Japanese people who made our trip such an amazing experience.