

ROUND TABLE IN FUKUOKA

By EDWIN B. BENJAMIN

ONE of the fondest fancies of the Anglo-Saxon mind is the ideal of free discussion. Whether the democratic processes are ever as pure and disinterested as apologists for the New England town-meeting would have us believe, there is no doubt that the average American is brought up in an atmosphere that at least pays theoretical homage to this ideal. Almost from infancy his opinion is eagerly canvassed, and his schooling presents an unbroken series of debates, forums, round-tables, at which he is privileged to air whatever opinions he may possess. With peoples outside the Anglo-Saxon forensic tradition the situation is somewhat different. It is true that there is less devotion to freedom of speech, but that is in part because of a recognition of its dynamic possibilities. I sometimes wonder if we really want to hear an opinion markedly different from our own; if we don't make the facile assumption that if a man is not a Republican, he must be nothing more radically different than a Democrat.

It had been expected when I was engaged to teach at Kyushu University, Fukuoka, Japan, under a program sponsored jointly by the American and Japanese governments, that I would in some way further the process of Japan's "democratization" that was then going on; and though I found plenty to occupy myself in the more immediate duties of my position, every so often it would occur to me that I had made very few attempts to hitch the wagons of my charges to any sort of western star. One day when I was talking with a student named Tanaka, who had some sort of position of authority in the university UNESCO group, the idea suddenly came to me what we needed was a round-table discussion on the economic future of Japan.

Tanaka's eyes gleamed when he heard the word *round-table*, which seemed to appeal to him, though I believe now that he had no very clear idea of what a round-table discussion might be. His English is not very good, and I was never sure how much he understood of what I would tell him, as we were making our plans. There were also things that happened that I never understood, but it is impossible for me to say whether because of misunderstanding or something less excusable. At any rate, I will tell the story as I saw it.

It had seemed to me desirable that as many different viewpoints as possible be represented. Unfortunately, there was little possibility of finding suitable Europeans in Fukuoka,

where the university was situated, though there were plenty of Americans; but I thought we could supply the deficiency with Koreans and Chinese, both North and South Koreans and Red and Nationalist Chinese. Fukuoka is a sort of traditional gateway to the mainland: a section of the western part of the town still bears the name of Tang-town, and in the eastern part of the city there was, I knew from reports of riots in the newspapers, a flourishing settlement of Koreans. The South Korean government maintained a consulate in Fukuoka, the head of which, a Mr. Choi, I knew slightly; and it seemed to me that it would not be difficult to find spokesmen for North Korea and for Nationalist and Communist China. I knew vaguely that some of the students had political connections with the left. Communism is not underground in Japan; in fact, Fukuoka has the reputation of being a Communist center, as it had been a center for militarism before the war. Sometimes as I sat in my office at the university of a Saturday afternoon preparing my next week's lecture on *The Faerie Queene*, I could hear the strains of the *Internationale* or *The Red Flag* from a Communist sound-truck patrolling the campus. And in order to be sure that every one would have a chance to express himself and to understand what was going on, we would have two-way interpreting. A criticism of the discussion groups and conferences arranged by foreigners in Japan is that they are too often conducted in English, which not only limits the number of those expressing opinions, but also limits the opinions expressed.

As I say, I am not sure whether Tanaka knew what I expected, but I left matters pretty much in his hands. After he had declined my offer to get in touch with the South Korean consul, I was under the impression that he would contact the Asiatics himself, leaving the Americans to me. As far as the latter were concerned, I had given the matter some thought. I did not want the occasion stamped with too official a character, and it seemed to me better on the whole to ask none of the American military, the occupation still being at that time in force. Instead I asked A. . . ., the American vice-consul, who, I thought, as a Yale man could be trusted to play the game; D. . . ., an American professor at Kumamoto University, who was in a position similar to mine; and Miss F. . . ., a rather pleasant Methodist missionary, a Virginian lady, whom I knew to be interested in political questions.

The first inkling of any possible difficulty I had was when I broached the matter to Miss F. . . . I had met her on the street-

car, and as we rattled along, I explained my plan to her. She was interested, she said, and would like to represent the Christian point of view, but she did not know, she added with a smile, whether it would be wise to express her views in public. There was the case of J. . . . W. . . . in Nagasaki, who was about to be deported, she had heard, for his left-wing sympathies.

I had heard of W. . . . , but I had not connected Miss F. . . . with him. W. . . . had come to Japan as a missionary, but had severed connections with his mission board. He lived entirely among the Japanese, supporting himself by giving English lessons and, according to rumor, working as a laborer. No one seemed to know exactly what his political views were, but it was said that the authorities thought them erratic enough to be on the point of deporting him on the pretext of not having confined himself to the type of work adumbrated on his passport.

In talking with Miss F. . . . , I gathered that she belonged to that wing of the Methodist Church, for some reason well represented in Japan, that is pacifist and somewhat socialistic. She was afraid that if she committed herself publicly, her passport might not be renewed the next time she went home on leave. She told me that she wanted to think the matter over, and that she would call me later.

I heard from her a few days later, and in a voice that sounded as much like Joan of Arc as the wiring of the Japanese telephone system permitted, she told me that she had decided to do it. I felt that the more sparks that flew, the better the discussion was likely to be; and I told her honestly that I was glad to hear her decision.

The meeting was scheduled for a Saturday afternoon early in May; it was open to the general public. It was to be held in the auditorium of the American Cultural Center, which was in the same building as the consulate; and after the meeting I had invited all those interested in continuing the discussion to come to my house for tea. Publicity was being handled by the members of the university UNESCO organization, who were also to help arrange chairs that Saturday morning.

The day was not propitious; a warm gusty wind was blowing from inland, showers fell intermittently, filling the streets with puddles of water. D. . . . was spending the weekend with me, and at the appointed hour we arrived at the Cultural Center. Tanaka was already there, also Saito and Kato, who were to act as interpreters. Kato was an old friend of mine, who had interpreted for me previously and who expected to be leaving

shortly for a year's study in the United States under the GARIOA program. Saito I had never especially cared for, and I suspect the feeling was mutual. He had what seemed to me a sly, knowing smile; I remember his asking me once why I thought the American professors in Japan, who were mostly young and without academic reputation, should be paid larger salaries by the Japanese Ministry of Education than the most eminent scholars of the country. It was obviously not a question to which an answer was expected. He was known for his leftist political sympathies, and I am afraid, now that he has graduated, that for that reason he is having trouble finding a job.

Soon A. . . . and Miss F. . . . joined us, but as yet there was no sign of any of the other speakers. I had heard nothing from Tanaka as to whom he had asked.

By this time the auditorium, which held over a hundred people, had pretty well filled up, mostly with students from the local high schools or colleges, though I also noticed a sprinkling of townspeople. It doesn't take much to attract a crowd in Japan; many people will turn out for such an occasion just to have an opportunity to hear spoken English. Yet many of the members of this crowd were extraordinarily poorly dressed, and looked more like laborers than students of English.

The auditorium was not arranged as I would have done it. Tanaka was to act as chairman, and a seat had been placed for him on a level with the audience in front of the little stage. Chairs for the principal speakers were placed against the walls at some distance from the chair, Americans on one side and Asiatics on the other. The result was dispersive rather than cohesive: instead of the harmonious little group chatting and laughing around a table that one expects to see in a round-table discussion, we were split into opposing camps as in a formal debate.

The meeting had been scheduled for 1.30, and it was now nearly quarter of two. The four Americans had come, but none of the others. Suddenly the door opened, and a tough-looking man, surprisingly burly for an Asiatic, entered followed by several students. He strode importantly to where Tanaka was sitting, bowed, introduced himself, then allowed himself to be taken over to us. "I want you to meet Mr. Kim," said Tanaka; "he is Korean—North Korean." Mr. Kim bowed again, turned around and walked to the other side of the auditorium where he seated himself.

It now developed that the meeting was ready to begin. "But where are the other speakers?" I asked Tanaka.

"Perhaps they will not be able to come," which is as near as a Japanese will ever get to a direct negative.

Tanaka then turned to us. "You will make speeches now," he said; "ten minutes."

I explained to him with the aid of Kato, so that he would be sure to understand, that we did not want to make formal speeches; we had not prepared them, and we thought that more would be accomplished by a free discussion. He called Saito and one or two other students to him; there was an animated discussion in Japanese, at the end of which Tanaka turned to us again. "Please you make speeches now," he said.

There seemed to be little to do but comply, though I was somewhat annoyed. Japanese students are accustomed to hearing from their teachers little moral disquisitions, even seem to like them; I have often been asked at meetings if I had any "message" for the audience; but I had hoped that on this occasion we would not be telling them what to think so much as submitting a variety of opinions which might help them to formulate their own. I need not have worried.

I was thankful that D. . . . offered to speak first, since the general confusion of the last few minutes had driven out of my mind any coherent thoughts I might have been able to muster concerning the economic future of Japan. D. . . . is a fluent speaker; I always enjoy listening to him, though I sometimes think the facade is more imposing than the structure behind it. He talks down to his audience, almost as though they were little children, a practice not difficult to develop in a foreign country, where so little of what one says is fully understood; but his manner inspires confidence, his diction is good, and I believe that he is popular as a speaker. I could not but admire his poise as, without a moment's hesitation, he faced the audience and began in his carefully modulated accents to speak.

The economic salvation of Japan, he said, lay in trade with Southeast Asia. There are all those little countries down there (waving his hand affectionately in the direction of Bangkok)—oh Burma, Siam, the Philippines—that need textiles and machines and toys. They can send *you* raw materials (he pointed to his audience with a smile), and you can *send them* (pointing out the window) manufactured goods.

He certainly made it sound like a happy exchange, and I could see members of the audience nodding approvingly as he

spoke, though often with Japanese audiences listening to speeches in English it is a sign that they understand rather than agree with what is being said. The captious might have complained of an absence of precise statistics, but as a purely impromptu job it was extraordinarily good. There was a burst of applause when after about ten minutes in the same vein D. . . . turned his place over to Kato, who had been conscientiously taking notes as he spoke and now prepared to interpret in Japanese.

I spoke next, and as I was interested at the time in England, I drew, for not the first time in the history of the world, a parallel between the situations of England and Japan. I believe I called the spirit of England since the war, her reaction to her economic plight, "a moral fact of the greatest significance for our time"; and I called upon Japan to emulate the austerity and hard work of her sister island at the other end of the Asiatic land mass. I felt rather proud of myself when I had finished, and I hoped that Kato had missed none of my points.

D. . . . and I both agreed afterwards that A. . . . 's speech was a distinct disappointment; he seems to be one of those people who talk better in a small group than before an audience. He urged Japan to look toward the United States economically in the future, and was very definite in maintaining that under no circumstances must she think of reopening trade on a large scale with Red China.

Miss F. . . . had requested that she be left till last; she was the only one of us who remembered to say what a good idea it was for us to get together in fellowship and discuss these problems without prejudice. She also, with her almost too bright smile, thanked the cultural center for extending its hospitality to us. These preliminaries had taken up at least half of her allotted ten minutes, and she now proceeded to treat the question of Japan's economic future "from the Christian point of view." She had been in Japan, she said, both before and after the war, and she was aware of the terrible devastation the war had brought with it. Whatever she does, Japan must not run the risk of war again; she must honor the constitution, which, as we all knew, had outlawed war, and devote herself to the ways of peace. If she does that, and trusts in the guidance of a divine power, the economic future will take care of itself.

It did not seem to me at the time that Miss F. . . . 's speech made any greater, or lesser, impression on the audience than those of the rest of us, though, as I look back on it now in the light of what I came to know about the political views of

Japanese students, I think that quite a few of those present must have found it sympathetic. Fear of war and distrust of capitalism are as much in vogue in Japanese universities today as they were in American universities during the thirties, and Christianity could find no surer way of appealing to the average Japanese student than through pacifism and socialism. The Japanese have such an odd notion as to what Christianity is, however, (and one cannot wholly blame them) that I am not sure that those present that afternoon were able to understand the connection Miss F. . . . was trying to make between Christianity and somewhat liberal political views.

So far the afternoon had proceeded calmly enough; certainly there had been enough different points advanced to keep us arguing happily for the rest of the meeting. It was now Mr. Kim's turn. He faced the audience purposefully.

I still haven't the faintest idea who Mr. Kim is, or where he comes from; but his speech was certainly the turning point of the round-table discussion. He spoke in fluent Japanese that was only partially intelligible even to A. . . . and Miss F. . . . , who are fairly proficient; and he spoke so rapidly that there was no time for Kato to tell us what was being said. Then his speech seemed totally different in kind from ours, as the Amazon can scarcely be compared to a gentle stream curling through an English park. Possibly he thought that since he was outnumbered four to one, his speech should be four times as long as ours had been, for at the end of ten minutes he was still working up steam. Without knowing a word of Japanese it was not hard to gather what he was talking about; it was an out and out denunciation of the American policy in Korea delivered in as vehement and inflammatory a manner as possible. "Act of aggression on the part of Syngman Rhee", "Dulles' visit to Seoul on the eve of the war," "American imperialism,"—I knew they were all there. As I looked at Mr. Kim, stern, impressive, accusing, pouring out the flood of his eloquence, I felt as the members of a high-school debating society might feel who had invited the prophet Jeremiah to take part in a discussion of the duties of citizenship. The audience was sitting on the edge of its chairs drinking it in rapturously, though an occasional embarrassed glance was cast in our direction.

There was no holding the meeting from then on. Mr. Kim spoke, or rather thundered, for about an hour; and the moment he had finished, it seemed as though half the audience was on its feet, begging the chairman for a chance to speak. Some were

students, some the dubious looking characters I had noted earlier; in the center of the audience there was a large cluster of high-school girls, but none of them volunteered. Some of the speakers had brought prepared speeches, which they produced when called upon and began to read. Despite the high value the Japanese set on discipline and self-control, they are an extremely emotional people; and I have never heard such passionate declamation. Voices would become deep and resonant; eyes would flash; and speeches would be accompanied by the most dramatic gestures. I realized that I was looking at a side of Asia I had never really seen in action before; this was the Asia of blood and fire, of student suicide and the *banzai* charge. These young men were the spiritual cousins of the Korean students marching under banners written in their own blood, even of the Indian who throws himself in ecstasy before the great car of Jagernath. When Mary Magdalene kneels before Christ, wiping the ointment from his feet with her hair, Aristotle flies out the window.

There was little we could do but sit the storm out; one might as well have tried to stop a volcano. Every so often Tanaka would call the meeting to order, turn to us uneasily, and ask us if we had anything to say. D. . . had lapsed into a vindictive silence; Miss F. . . ., who had leaned over to me at the end of Mr. Kim's speech and said, "I could understand some of the things he was saying, and good gracious!", smiled brightly and said that she had nothing to say at this point. Feeling that someone ought to say something, I got up and said as flatly as I could that in my opinion North Korea had committed a definite act of aggression, that there was no other explanation of the facts. I then tried to turn attention to eastern Europe, to the refugees pouring out of the eastern zone of Germany and to the fall of Czechoslovakia; but I felt that I was not markedly successful. The real subject was not Communism in Korea, or the comparative merits of United States and Russia; their pulses were maddened by that strange and sinister drum-beat that the Spaniards heard at Tenochtitlan, the British in India, the French in Morocco, and now the Americans everywhere: Yankee, go home! The hero of the afternoon was A. . . ., who to his credit attempted to meet the audience on their own ground and speak to them in Japanese. Though as valiant as the young Hollander at the dyke, he was not, I'm afraid, as effective, for his antagonists had a way of lapsing into Hakata *ben*, the local dialect of the language that A. . . . does not understand.

At 5.00, the time the center was supposed to close, the meeting was still going strong. I decided that I had better leave and make some preparations, in the unlikely possibility that any one should come for tea, so issuing a general invitation through Kato, and thanking the people for coming, I made my exit with D. . . . I doubt if many of the audience were aware that we had gone.

The tea party was more successful than I had anticipated. Mr. Kim, needless to say, did not come, and once we had removed the students from his inflammatory influence, it was not hard to divide and conquer. Five or six of the highschool girls showed up, and though they scarcely shed any fresh light on the political issues of the day, their presence acted as a drag on the more radical leanings of the boys. Surprisingly enough, Saito was prominent among the guests, and he and D. . . . engaged in a spirited argument on the desirability of Japan's purchasing coal from Siberia. Russia had recently made the offer of a certain number of tons at a price considerably lower than that at which Japan was currently purchasing coal from the United States, but the Japanese government had preserved her economic chastity, refusing to traffic with the infidel. D. . . . treated the offer purely as bait, and made the telling point that he supposed that the coal was mined by some of the 300,000 Japanese soldiers still detained in Russia. Student sympathizers with Russia do not like to be reminded of these prisoners—a surprisingly large number have relatives who have never returned—and Saito's confidence was visibly shaken. D. . . ., on the other hand, had shaken off his lethargy of the afternoon, and, rousing himself like a strong man after sleep, was dominating the conversation in his customary fashion.

At 7.00 I decided that we had better stop the tea-party, though people were still appearing at the door. The discussion had lasted now for over five hours, and I was sure that we had all expressed ourselves to the fullest of our capacities. Besides, that night the spring festival started, and I was eager to get out in the streets. As I was ushering the first batch of students to the door, I could hear D. . . . saying to a giggling group of the high-school girls, "But I wanted you to ask *me* questions this afternoon; I wanted you to find out what *I* thought."

During my stay in Japan I never attempted to organize another round-table discussion, nor could I ever decide whether this one had been a success or failure. Both D. . . . and A. . . . felt that the meeting had not been any discussion at all, but

simply an opportunity for the Communists to sound off, and they suspected the youthful leaders of UNESCO of complicity. I felt that at least they had been allowed to present their views without interference, and even to attack United States, beneath the roof of a building from which the United States flag was flying; but I am aware that such arguments are more likely to impress Anglo-Saxons than people with a different cultural tradition. I also felt, as I often felt in Japan, inwardly rebuked at the seriousness of these people, and slightly ashamed of my own comfortable middle-class values. Japan is in a singularly unfortunate situation these days, both politically and economically; and if she is not wholly like the Israel caught between Egypt and Assyria that some of the missionaries like to compare her to, still what could I know of the rigors of decision facing this poor and sadly overpopulated country? I should not be surprised if Mr. Kim, for whom I certainly cherish little affection, were locked up somewhere in jail today.