

Heading for the Trans-Siberian

More than 20 years ago now, when I was an undergraduate student, I dabbled in a variety of foreign languages. I was particularly drawn to Slavic languages, characterized by their complicated cases. I tried my hand at a few of them, including Polish and Serbian, although I eventually put the most effort into Russian, which has the largest number of speakers amongst the Slavic languages.

In my first year, I had the opportunity to do a homestay with a Russian family in the largest city in Siberia. The family I stayed with had a daughter, Anya, who was majoring in Japanese – as she took care of everything for me, I didn't have many chances to test my Russian language skills.

So, during my second year, I decided to head to Russia again. Having time on my hands as a student, I decided to take a seven-day, six-night trip on the Trans-Siberian railway. I thought that on the return trip, I could stop along the way and meet Anya's family again.

First, I had to head to the far-eastern port city of Vladivostok, the first station on the Trans-Siberian route. There were no direct flights from Japan, so I opted to cross by sea. At the time, there was a three-day, two-night sea route via Korea that left from Fushiki Port in Toyama Prefecture.

With my large backpack, I left my one-room apartment in Tokyo and took the first train out of the city. I transferred between a few rapid express trains, as well as local trains, on my way to Fushiki port. Getting off the train, I noticed that many of the street signs included Russian, in addition to Japanese and English – just like many other port towns on the Japan Sea. When I arrived at the port, there were a great number of Russians waiting to board the ship, and a handful of other Japanese university students. Us students were naturally drawn to each other, and quickly introduced ourselves.

Amongst the students were three girls studying law at a well-known private university, and were apparently members of a travel circle. There was also a male student who studied at the Shōnan Campus of the same university, but was not a prior friend of the three. They all turned out to be the same age as me – and there was another, one-year younger, male student from a university in the Kansai region, who was apparently going abroad for the first time.

When we boarded the ship, we found that there was another Japanese woman on board, Maki-san, who was a little older. She was well travelled, and had lived in the U.S. for a while. Although she didn't talk much about herself, her appearance surprised the rest of us – she was dressed lightly, as if going on a day-hike. Maki-san said she was planning to travel overland all the way to Iran. The student from Kansai was smitten with Maki-san, which we teased him about. It turned out all of us had the same goal – to ride the Trans-Siberian Railway – although our destinations were different.

At the port, departure procedures were horribly lax compared to those at the airport – almost no-one paid attention to our luggage. The passengers were different to those at airports, too. Most were Russians who worked across the shipping lanes between the far east and Japan. In fact, the ship was also loaded with used cars, which sold well in Russia. A few years later, Russia would increase tariffs on this kind of import, and the sea route we took was discontinued.

Once aboard, the atmosphere was already very Russian – for instance, the beer on sale was named after a World Heritage Lake in Siberia. In the dining room was a familiar soup made with beets, amongst other standard Russian fare. In the night, the dining room became a disco, where the Russian passengers shifted their bodies lazily along to the music. There wasn't much else to do on the ship.

Over the three-day journey, us Japanese students became good friends. When we arrived at the port in Vladivostok, the student from Shōnan had to leave quickly, as he was meeting an expat who had been his senior at university. Nevertheless, he quickly promised to meet again in Japan. Apparently, he was going to stay for a while with this *senpai*, before taking the Trans-Siberian into Mongolia, where he would teach abacus to children.

The rest of us were to board the Trans-Siberian train earlier. While the remaining students had all booked the same hotel, Maki-san surprised us again by the revelation that she hadn't arranged

accommodation yet. While a few years later, this town would host the APEC meeting, and experience remarkable development, at the time there wasn't much choice in hotels. In fact, what surprised us most about Maki-san's carefree approach to travel was that, at the time, it shouldn't have been possible to get a visa to Russia without arranging accommodation. I guess the well-travelled Maki-san just knew the tricks of the trade.

The remaining members of the group had some time before we would board the train, and, as it was not my first time in Russia, and I was the only one who spoke Russian, we decided first to explore the city together. Many encounters, and farewells, awaited us. Our summer vacation and our adventures had only just begun.

Teacher's Note: Many of the questions for this passage rely not only on in-text clues, but will also likely require in-class research by the students. This may be used as an opportunity to reinforce in students that intercultural and interlinguistic understanding is often informed by broader, general knowledge.

Questions, Answers and Hints:

- 1. What is the name of the city where the author did a homestay during his first year of university?**

Answer: Novosibirsk (ノヴォシビルスク).

Hints/Clues: The narrator mentioned that his homestay was in the 'largest city in Siberia.' A perfunctory search will reveal this to be Novosibirsk.

- 2. Why did the narrator take rapid expresses and regular trains, instead of the *Shinkansen*, to Fushiki Port in Toyama?**

Answer: Because the *Hokuriku Shinkansen* only extended to Toyama in 2015. Or, perhaps because as a student, the narrator wanted to save money.

Hints/Clues: Firstly, the story was set at least twenty years ago, as referenced in the opening. While the *Hokuriku Shinkansen* was already likely operating, it was only in 2015 that the route extended beyond Nagano. Another potential option is that, as a student, the narrator had time (he mentions this when planning his trip on the Trans-Siberian), and also may have wanted to save money.

- 3. What is the last city where the Trans-Siberian Railway leaves from Vladivostok?**

Answer: Moscow.

Hints/Clues: Not directly referenced in the text, but a search of the Trans-Siberian railway will quickly reveal that the final station (note: if leaving from Vladivostok) is Moscow Yaroslavsky station.

- 4. What soup dish using beets was served on the ship?**

Answer: Borscht.

Hints/Clues: Again, students will likely find the answer to this through an internet search, based on the key words of 'Russian,' 'soup,' and 'beets.' Also bolstering this is the narrator's description of the soup: 'a *familiar* soup made with beets, amongst other *standard Russian fare*' – that it is familiar suggests the narrator, who has previously spent time in Russia, knows the soup well, and the insinuation of being amongst other 'standard Russian fare,' suggests it is a very commonplace soup – hence, the first result of a search based on the appropriate key words is likely to be correct.

5. What is the name of the Russian beer sold on the ship?

Answer: Baikal.

Hints/Clues: Again, this may be arrived at by a search of the key words ‘Siberia,’ ‘lake,’ and ‘world heritage.’ It can be confirmed by searching for ‘Baikal,’ and ‘beer.’

6. The narrator mentioned Russian languages on signs in Toyama, and that this was ‘a characteristic of many port towns on the Japan Sea.’ Why do you think this is the case?

Answer: Trade with Russia resulting in many Russians visiting port towns on the Japan Sea.

Hints/Clues: The strongest hint is the passengers on the ship – ‘there were a great number of Russians waiting to board the ship, and a handful of other Japanese university students’ – suggesting that Japanese boarding this route are a minority. Also, that atmosphere on the ship was ‘Russian,’ and that of the Russian passengers, most ‘worked across the shipping lanes between the far east and Japan,’ suggests that trade is important, and thus many Russians would disembark in Japan Sea port cities, generating a demand for Russian-language information.