

During the week of Oct. 4th- 11th I had the pleasure of visiting Japan thanks to the MIRAI program. This program not only gave me an opportunity to finally travel to one of the most fascinating countries in the world, given its extensive history and a completely different culture than my own, but also meet with other students from over 50 countries, both from Europe and Central Asia. During this week I met with many different people with whom I have exchanged thoughts on various subjects, as each and every one of us are studying different majors. Indeed, the experience I gained while participating in the MIRAI program was of immense value and no doubt will prove to be invaluable to me in the future.

The long trip that I took starting from Vilnius to Helsinki and then all the way to Tokyo was quite an adventure in itself since this was my very first flight. However, the moment I passed through customs and passport registration, all that fatigue faded as the understanding set in – I'm in Japan.

Me and some other students that were traveling with a similar route to mine were greeted by a couple of representatives of the MIRAI program. They warmly welcomed us and after some time while we waited for a few more students to arrive, we then boarded a bus that gave us a quick and very brief tour of Tokyo. This day was supposed to be just us students arriving and settling in the hotel, however we were taken to one place and it was the Asakusa, an older district of Tokyo that still has very real remnants of the history that took place here. It is also well known for the Buddhist temple Sensō-ji. After the memorable tour of one of the most famous districts in Tokyo, we were taken to a traditional Japanese style restaurant where we all had tempura and enjoyed the food while getting to know each other and our interests in Japan.

The next day was more of an official day. Suited up and a little nervous, early in the morning we took the bus which drove us through busy and narrow streets of Tokyo and finally arrived at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs where we had two different lectures. Excited, we listened to an author, Alexander C. Bennett, present his book about his experiences and deep love for kendo. How a young man of 17 came to Japan from New Zealand with an exchange program, unsure of his future and ended up living there for 30 years. Now he has Ph.Ds in studies related to *budo* and an extremely high skill in kendo. It was very interesting and inspiring to listen to a man with such a passion for a Japanese martial art and life philosophy.

As for the other lecture, it was given by an official on matters of Japan's humanitarian help for Africa and their recent achievements in pursuing this Foreign policy.

On Oct. 6th we had the honour of visiting one of the most prestigious universities in Japan – the KEIO university in Tokyo. We spent most of the day there. At first we listened to

a professor's speech on the topic of "Japan in East Asia under Power Shift". It was very interesting, particularly to students who are majoring in International Relations or Politics as the lecture was centred around these key factors. After this, we had a lunch break at the university together with the Japanese students who are studying there. Meeting with other students and exchanging ideas with them as we all ate our Japanese style meal together was definitely an experience.

For the next lecture all 84 of us were divided into three groups together with some Japanese students and went to three different lectures. I got into the group which had a lecture on economy by a professor, who in his distinguished career was also Deputy Director-General of the Economic Affairs Bureau. Even though I myself have nothing to do with Economics, I was still amazed by the professor's deep knowledge on the matter.

Finally, after a real day at the university, we took a group picture together with all the professors and the students that accompanied us and said our goodbyes. However, our day was far from over as we drove to the Shinagawa station and waited for the famous Shinkansen, or Bullet Train, to take us to our next destination which was Hiroshima, where we spent one night.

Surprisingly, the next day proved to be very hot, even the Japanese people said that the weather was unusually hot for October. Unlike the other two days, Oct. 6th was different as our first destination was the famous Itsukushima shrine. As we drove by the shoreline, the soft mist enveloped the mountains that emerged as we were nearing the sacred place. The interpreters who accompanied us throughout the week said that it was a pity, as the shrine looks best when it's sunny, however we thought that the soft mist and grey sky only made the experience that much more memorable as the great red *otorii* stood in the far distance.

After reaching the island, we were given an hour to walk and explore by ourselves. Most of the students welcomed that idea however I decided to follow the interpreters as they talked about the massive shrine complex and its history. Out of all the places that we visited during this week in Japan, Itsukushima shrine was by far my favourite place.

Sadly, the hour passed quickly and we yet again found ourselves on a boat, taking us back to the mainland and by that time the soft grey mist had begun to clear away. We were taken to a nearby restaurant where we enjoyed a delicious meal, beautifully set in front of us.

Next in our busy schedule was the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Park and Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum. It was very insightful to hear about the terrors of war that took place here, especially from a person who had lived through it all as we had a meeting with hm. Together with this person's memories and the various stories in the museum that we visited,

we walked out with a better understanding of just how deep of a wound the bombing of Hiroshima has on the Japanese community as a whole.

Finally, after a long and eventful day, we took our bags and boarded the Shinkansen which now took us to Kyoto – Japan’s oldest capital where much of the country’s culture and tradition resides.

Yet again, we woke up early as the first destination of the day was the famous Kinkakuji – Golden Pavilion Temple. That day was quite different, as there were barely any clouds in the sky and the sun shone on the temple and lit the scenery. The surrounding trees that had already begun to slowly change their colour only beckoned the beauty. It’s one thing to look at such places through the internet but when you actually stand in the place – it’s completely different.

Next was another temple, massive and majestic – the Higashi Honganji Temple. There we met with two Buddhist monks that walked us around while explaining the history of the structure as well as the values of Buddhism. Together with the stories coming from real Buddhist monks we also had a meal that the monks eat – while it was definitely different from what we are used to, it was another kind of experience.

Finally, towards the end of our day in Kyoto we had the pleasure of going to the Kawamura Noh stage where we were explained the general concepts of this traditional Japanese theatre as well as shown the amazing costumes and masks that are used during the plays. After that, we were asked to sit back and enjoy a Noh play which was simply mesmerizing.

With that, our day in Kyoto ended as we boarded the Shinkansen for the last time, taking us back to Tokyo.

Next day, on Oct. 9th we had another, rather cultural day which started with the Tokyo National Museum where we were free to explore the niches and crevices of Japanese history by ourselves. From great works of art to Samurai armour and weapons, priceless artefacts from times long past – it was truly a trip through time.

After that, we were taken to the Tokyo Rinkai Disaster Prevention Park where we had a rather unusual experience. Together with the information and statistics about earthquakes and other calamities that Japan experiences each year, we walked around through various interactive rooms that picture moments after an earthquake had occurred while carrying these small tablets with ourselves that calculated our chance of survival depending on how we interact with the given situation in all of the rooms. I’m happy to say that I got a 100% from that almost a game like experience, however I doubt it would truly be so when an actual

earthquake or other natural disaster would take place which is why it was an invaluable experience to be at the Tokyo Rinkai Disaster Prevention Park.

At the end of the day, we were taken to the famous Roppongi Hills where we went to the observation deck. Sitting by a glass window, looking down as the sun gently begins to set in a massive city of so many different layers and people, so vivid and dynamic in everyday life was something each of us will hold dear to us. While we were given more time, most of us decided to stay at the observation deck and enjoy the scenery.

And then came our last day at Tokyo. Much like how we began our week, all of us dressed neatly and once again entered the Ministry of Foreign affairs building where we had a workshop. At first, representatives of the MIRAI program talked about their hopes and dreams for this program. Later we were divided in many different groups of six and had to exchange our ideas, impressions and experiences throughout this week as one of the group would quickly gather a plan and briefly present each of our possible future plan that would involve Japan. After that, we had a lecture about North Korea and the current situation in East Asia.

Finally, we had the honour of meeting with the Vice Prime Minister of Japan who talked about his ideas on the MIRAI program and its future development together with other countries.

At the end of the official part of the day, we all had a farewell lunch together during which we enjoyed the last moments together as the other part of the day were given to us to enjoy Tokyo by ourselves and so we did. While the long trip back to Lithuania was fast approaching, I walked the busy streets of Tokyo together with a friend from Latvia savouring each moment and view as our last day in Tokyo ended and after saying a warm goodbye to everyone, we all departed home.