

Underneath the Spreading Linden Tree: Haiku in Romania

Nishiike Mayo, First Secretary at the Embassy of Japan in Bucharest, Romania, reflects on the growing popularity of haiku in her adopted country.



Nishiike Tousei, chair of the Himawari Haiku Association and a member of the International Haiku Association, delivers a speech at the Museum of Art in Constanța, Romania.

The country where I presently work, Romania, has an extremely rich cultural base. One can find superb music, theater and, in particular, poetry. Children learn poetry as part of the curriculum. It is common to see small children proudly and brightly reciting poems at school performances or in front of guests who have been invited to their homes. Romania has produced many poets, and among them the great nineteenth-century poet Mihai Eminescu is a national hero — so much so that he appears on Romania's highest value banknote of 500 lei. Not just that, the country is rich in profound poetic sentiment, such as the

UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity registered *doina* (improvised folk music) and *balada* (orally transmitted epic poems based on stories and folklore). And today, Romania is also home to many *haijin* (haiku poets).

Among those, probably the best known is Romania's former ambassador to Japan, Radu Șerban. He has published many collections of haiku both in English and in Romanian, and is well known among those haiku aficionados who appreciate haiku from outside Japan.

In one of his collections, named "*Triptic romăno-nipon. Haiku*," Șerban plucks out parts of the ge-

nius descriptions of nature in Eminescu's poems, then quotes these poetic fragments in the form of haiku.

The following is an excerpt from "Mihai Eminescu, Sleepy Little Birds."

*Somnoroase păsărele
Pe la cuiburi se adună,
Se ascund în rămurile —
Noapte bună!*

*Sleepy little birds to drowse
Toward their nests guide their
flight,
Hide themselves amidst the
boughs —
So, good night!*

(English translation by Dimitrie Cuclin)

What do you think? They really read like haiku, don't they?

Nights without Crickets

In 1989, right after the political system changed in Romania, two haiku societies were born. The Societatea Romana de Haiku was formed in 1991 and the Societatea de Haiku din Constanța in 1992. Recently, I visited the latter with my father Nishiike Tousei, who is the chair of the Himawari Haiku Association, and also a member of the International Haiku Association.

Constanța is a port town facing the Black Sea. As the place where the poet Ovid was exiled by Emperor Augustus during the Roman era, it is also famous as a town of poetry composition. Last year the town celebrated forty years of exchange with its sister city of Yokohama (another port town),

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The author (second left) and father, Nishiike Tousei, with representative members of the Societatea Romana de Haiku din Constanța



The author with students of the Bucharest University of Economic Studies (ASE) following a special haiku seminar



The author and father with haiku poets Radu Șerban, Romania's former ambassador to Japan, and Clelia Ifrim, whose poems have been selected for the Space Poem Chains (linked verse anthologies) stored aboard the space module *Kibo* on the International Space Station.

and an international haiku festival was held to mark the anniversary.

On a Saturday in June, when the brisk breeze that blows through the green leaves had been replaced with a persistent cool wind, my father held a haiku seminar in the Museum of Art in Constanța. It was attended by many members of the Constanța haiku association who brought their own published haiku collections, essays, novels and other works. For a while after my father arrived it was

much like a discussion and book exchange and signing event. The Societatea de Haiku din Constanța was founded by Ion Codrescu, who also launched the internationally known haiku periodical *Albatros*. The present chair is Aurica Vaceanu. Vaceanu works hard to promote haiku education in schools, and to date has taught haiku at forty schools in the Constanța sub-

urbs. Via haiku, he also has contact with teachers all over Europe. And through the society, many Romanian children have also participated in the JAL Foundation World's Children Haiku Contest. According to Vaceanu, in some European countries, there is a new activity known as "haiku therapy." Amazingly, some children with speech and functional disorders have improved by composing haiku.

Now, here are some poems from the society's members:

This is by Șerban Codrin.

*Noapți fără greieri —
ceva i se întâmplă
Universului*

*Nights without crickets —
something is happening
to the Universe!*

Another member, Pavel Patrichi, is a prolific poet. In fact, he has written 45,000 poems since 1972.

*pe șosea umedă
doi arici striviți
noaptea nunții*

*on the moist road
two crushed hedgehogs
wedding night*

The Spirit of Haiku

Following is the central idea of the speech my father gave at the seminar, with me acting as interpreter.

The essence of Japanese haiku is the 5-7-5 syllabic meter and kigo (seasonal references), but this meter has its roots in the distinct rhythms of Japanese and doesn't necessarily translate to other languages. Seasonal references, meanwhile, vary according



Eminescu's Linden Tree. Mihai Eminescu (1850–1889) is said to have written many poems beneath this 500-year-old tree in Copou Park, Iași, Romania.

A selection of haiku anthologies and magazines produced by Japanese and Romanian haiku poets from Societatea Romana de Haiku din Constanța

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to the region and the changing times, so they don't necessarily apply to every country in the world. If so, the haiku essence that is shared between Japan and Europe must be the spirit of haiku itself: namely the peace of heart that arises when nature and human beings become one. Also important is the popularity of haiku. By that, I mean that since haiku are short anyone can compose them and, therefore, anyone can participate. Meanwhile, haiku societies also play an important role. Society members — from beginners to experienced poets — all submit their poems anonymously (toku), are voted on anonymously (senku), critiqued and appreciated, then finally the poet's name is revealed (hikou). It is precisely this society process that ensures popularity and accessibility. And it helps to make a web of human connections too, I feel.

While chatting to people after the speech, I discovered that the Șerban Codrin mentioned above had pub-

lished a book called “*Stâlpi de Felinar*” and included a small almanac of kigo — a volume known as *Saijiki* in Japanese). It is very interesting! For example, the spring kigo include words and phrases such as “Mărțișor” (an ancient Romanian festival that celebrates the arrival of spring), “mielul” (lamb), “Mărar” (dill), “Ieșirea oilor la pasune” (grazing sheep), “tei” (*Tilia miqueliana*, or linden tree), and “culesul urzicilor” (picking nettles). There are many lovely kigo based on Romanian traditions that give a feel for the arrival of spring, such as setting sheep to pasture when the snow on the mountains melts, slaughtering sheep for Easter celebrations, or eating nettles with fried egg. One becomes keenly aware that the haiku compositions are rooted in local seasons and events.

The linden tree flowers that appear in this Romanian *saijiki* are a symbol of the great poet Mihai Eminescu and are often employed by Romanian haiku poets. The month of May, when the linden tree flowers,

marks a gap between the long severe winters and the hot summer. Foliage gets more verdant by the day and it is the glittering season when Romania is at its most beautiful. Linden trees are planted along the streets of Romanian towns and give off a strong fragrance. So much so that when you open your windows in the night, you could almost become drunk with the scent. Someday I hope I manage to write a good poem about the flowers of the linden tree.

There is a movement to register haiku as UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. With this visit to Constanța, I tried to make my own little contribution to the gradual spread of haiku around the world.

*One tall sunflower, on a donkey trail.
Knocking on the wall of fortified church. Evening downpour.*



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