

## REFLECTIONS ON MOE BERG'S JAPANESE REFLECTIONS<sup>1</sup>

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For the most part, the people of this country are extremely generous, honest, and sincere. They do not despise foreigners. They trust even those whom they have never seen before. They are also somewhat naive like our provincials who have never been to a big city.<sup>2</sup>

Nomura Ichinoshin Tadazane, member of Japan's first official mission to the United States. 1860

The Japanese are a proud, very proud race, the old people are stately and everybody has good manners and a smile.<sup>3</sup>

Moe Berg, member of visiting U.S. baseball team, Tokyo, 1932

Japanese and Americans have formed sweeping opinions of each other's "national character" since Commodore Perry's "black ships" steamed into Uraga Bay in 1853. More often than not, the commentary has revealed more about the observer than the observed. What the sojourner has found remarkable speaks not only of his private concerns and values, but also of political relations between Pacific rivals. Moe Berg's writings on Japan in the early 1930s, a sample of which is excerpted at the end of this article, are no exception.

Berg was a ho-hum catcher. During his pro career, spanning the years from 1923, when he broke into the majors with the Brooklyn Dodgers, through 1939, when he retired from the Boston Red Sox, his annual batting average fluctuated between .077 and .333.<sup>4</sup> Baseball scout Mike Gonzalez once tersely summed up Berg's abilities as "good field, no hit."<sup>5</sup> He batted best when he played least, a fact that his coaches seemed to have recognized by allowing him to spend many of his pro years riding the bench. During those few fat seasons of .250 batting averages, slowness on the base paths leavened any praise for his other qualities as a ballplayer.

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<sup>1</sup>An earlier version of this article appeared in *Baseball History*. It is revised here with the editor's permission.

<sup>2</sup>Quoted in Masao Miyoshi, *As We Saw Them: The First Japanese Embassy to the United States (1860)* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1979): 56.

<sup>3</sup>From Berg's letter, reproduced below.

<sup>4</sup>David S. Neft and Richard M. Cohen, *The Sports Encyclopedia: Baseball*. (New York: St. Martin's/Marek, 1985), 139-196 *passim*.

<sup>5</sup> Robert Slater, *Great Jews in Sports* (New York: Middle Village, 1983), 20.

Where Berg demonstrated speed, agility, and even suppleness was in his ability to think. Well-educated, avowedly-intellectual players are unusual in baseball history; a playing intellectual a rarity. Although he consistently, if perhaps with false modesty, tried to downplay his academic accomplishments and scholarly interests, inevitably demanding in interviews and articles to be judged solely on his performance on the field, he was justifiably renowned as "...the best-educated man to ever play in the major leagues."<sup>6</sup> Although he appeared to struggle throughout his life to escape being pegged as a curiosity – a Jewish, intellectual, polyglot ballplayer, his unusual personal background actually yielded benefits that Berg, despite protestations to the contrary, fully enjoyed. His unusual talents brought enabled him to travel, read widely while avoiding a nine-to-five routine, enjoy creature comforts, and meet politically powerful leaders, though these contacts were probably never extensive as he made them out to be. His apparent intellectual strengths also probably had as much to do with his selection as a baseball "goodwill" ambassador as did his rather lackluster playing statistics. But his fine education and wide reading did not fully prepare him for what he was to find during his first visit to Japan in 1932.

Berg was not, of course, a naïve provincial in his understanding of his own society. A Princeton undergraduate education, law school at Columbia, a lifelong love of learning, and classical languages suggest that this intellectual ballplayer should have been a keen and critical observer. But something often happens to the first-time visitors to Japan and it happened to Berg. With the other traveler's essentials, an entire set of values are usually carried along with the luggage. These are characteristically sweepingly judgmental, if at moments charming and occasionally insightful, and usually result in broad and generally unfounded generalizations. Like Lafcadio Hearn decades before him and millions of tourists since, Berg saw Japan as a fairyland. His ride from the port city of Yokohama to Tokyo was "a page out of a dream" and this sense of unreality continues to color his later comments.

The unreality of the fairyland image is easy to see if we step back from Berg's view to a broader perspective on what many Japanese people were going through around the time of his visit. Japan had been hard hit by the worldwide crash of 1929. Its silk market had collapsed and Japanese journalists spoke of the crisis in the countryside. Unemployment rates soared and the press reported starvation in some villages in northeastern Japan. Beyond Japan's borders, its military forces had invaded Manchuria and were in the process of establishing a puppet regime there. Japanese central officials also viewed with concern the protectionist legislation pending in the U.S., such as the infamous Smoot-Hawley tariff measures. They considered these efforts to ban goods not even produced with American borders to have been racially motivated actions to contain Japan and its growing economic reach.

Despite the looming darkness, Berg's view was decidedly sunny. In a land where starvation was a fact and child-selling to avoid it a recognized social problem, he saw a nation where all worked and not a single beggar despoiled the landscape. Perhaps

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<sup>6</sup>Ibid. Examples of Berg's modesty, real or assumed, can be seen in the collection of materials on his life in the Moe Berg File, Baseball Hall of Fame, Cooperstown, New York. The paltry statistics that limn his major league baseball career – a handful of major leagues game actually played, a lifetime average of .243, and a reliable place as the team's ever-present bench rider – suggest that he had much to be modest about. I am grateful to Peter Levine for sharing his notes from the Berg file with me.

because he seldom ventured far from Tokyo's Ginza district, a section of the city that even in 1930 more resembled New York's Fifth Avenue than typical Japanese communities, he witnessed only immaculately neat houses, lovingly manicured parks, and department stores where counters overflowed with goods. As for the international developments, Berg was completely silent, which *might* be explained as dissimulation to cover his later claim of actually serving as a spy. But aside from Berg's own curiously understated bragging, there is not much hard evidence to suggest that he actually served as an important operative in Japan or, if he did, that his accomplishments proved crucial to the later war effort.

As do most visitors to Japan, Berg of course had much to say about the distinctive customs of the "natives." He found bowing "very intriguing and interesting" and, obviously not realizing that bowing expresses a hierarchical social relationship between those practicing it, immediately adopted the custom as his own. One can imagine the Japanese reaction to his friendly attempts to go native. His indiscriminate bowing to acquaintances of whatever social position and noisy slurping of hot tea to assure his hosts that he really enjoyed their fare probably reinforced the notion that Americans are indeed friendly, albeit naïve, provincials when it comes to understanding Japan.

Berg's desire to please clearly stemmed from a genuine fondness for the Japanese whom he met. Men earned his appreciation by being hardworking, courteous, well-groomed, and capable of producing a passable English-language newspaper. Given the times and notions of what passed as "civilization," these markers not surprisingly indicated to Berg that Japanese men and the society they were building were making great strides. He was even more impressed with Japanese women. Clad in colorful kimonos, feet wrapped in spotless white *tabi*, the ladies with the fine black hair *all* had smilingly good dispositions – a view that may have been reinforced by the inordinate amount of time that the ballplayer spent with geisha, those women whom our observer declared, had been "trained beautifully" in kneeling and tray-lifting.

Of course, such praise of life and customs in dreamlike Tokyo, display an undercurrent of racism running throughout Berg's observations, an undercurrent that has long bedeviled Japanese-American relations. It was not until 1953, exactly one century after Perry's gunboat-enforced "opening" of Japan, that a federal law that virtually banned Japanese immigration to the United States was rescinded. In trade friction between Japan and the U.S. in postwar decades, one also notices resentments based upon race as well as export levels.

Berg reveals this strain in his sense of superiority in what he is surprised at. He is pleasantly shocked to find that the Japanese are in fact a "courteous race." What's more, the water and milk are as fine as anywhere and the houses actually tidy. And, as if speaking of another species, he observes that "contrary to what is generally believed, the Japanese are a very clean race, especially the women – they bathe in extremely hot water, once or twice *every* day. . . ." [Emphasis in original]. As the American-born son of a Ukrainian Jewish family, Berg did his best to fit in, whether on the streets of Newark, where baseball became his passion, or at Princeton, where he shied from joining campus Jewish groups. In his observations of the "Japanese race" he seems to have acclimated himself too well to mainstream values.

Berg's observations might have been expected. After all, he was something of an innocent abroad and, as such, might be forgiven the mistakes and grandiose

generalizations typical of the casual sojourner. Furthermore, his implicit racism was not atypical, but in the air that people breathed during Berg's day. The "scientific" community in Germany had its own ultimately deadly ideas about master races and hierarchies, but the rhetoric was not limited to Nazism. Jim Crow lived in the U.S. unchallenged and, as Berg himself experienced, shared territory with anti-Semitism.

Of course, if Berg was indeed a major spy for the U.S. government, his views might have produced consequences beyond his touristy observations. Although the precise nature of his undercover activities is still unknown, there is one tantalizing question that suggests that Berg might have actually been involved in some kind of espionage work. That question is: Why would a bench-riding, decidedly mediocre player with scant experience have been sent along with Babe Ruth, Lou Gehrig, and other all-stars to visit Japan? One answer is that during the 1930s, American intelligence officials were intent on divining the mood and motives of an increasingly bellicose Japanese state. Berg's observations and analysis of Japan were sufficiently important for the government to support his trips to Japan and to rely on the observations gleaned from his visits. Supporting this view is the fact that modern Japanese studies had yet to be established in the U.S. and few people engaged in government service spoke Japanese. Given the need to know the enemy and the dearth of expertise to do the job, a supposedly intellectual ballplayer might have been considered better than nothing. In short, in this land of the blind, Berg, with his limited insights and gift for self-promotion, might have been treated as an espionage king. Certainly, stranger things have happened in the house of mirrors known as the American intelligence community.

Before the mid-1990s, studies on Berg's life in fact assert that his work played a crucial role in the war against Japan. Louis Kaufman, Barbara Fitzgerald, and Tom Sewell in their 1974 biography of Berg even credit him with taking the photographs that the U.S. military used in planning the 1945 fire bombing of Tokyo – a raid that killed more people than the atomic blast over Hiroshima.<sup>7</sup> During his career, they describe his meeting high government officials including Bill Donovan, Cordell Hull, and Leslie R. Groves and depict his formal induction into the OSS, service in Europe and Latin America, and contributions to the war effort by making propaganda broadcasts telling the Japanese that "you cannot win this war."<sup>8</sup> Although not even a footnote is provided to bolster these assertions and circumstantial evidence, Kaufman, Fitzgerald, and Sewell state without qualification that: "Secret U.S. government documents show that Berg was America's premier atomic spy during World War II and that he played a vital role in gathering information on the work of Germany's major scientists."<sup>9</sup> After the war, he reportedly continued to work for the CIA.<sup>10</sup> Admittedly, Kaufman and company's case for Berg's key role in wartime military strategy is weak. They provide scant documentation but minutely detailed, and therefore suspiciously novelistic, recreations of Berg's cloak and dagger work in Japan.

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<sup>7</sup>Louis Kaufman, Barbara Fitzgerald, and Tom Sewell, *Moe Berg: Athlete, Scholar, Spy* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1974), 28.

<sup>8</sup>Kaufman, *et al.*, 146.

<sup>9</sup>Kaufman, *et al.*, 163.

<sup>10</sup>Slater, 21.

Nicholas Dawidoff's thorough 1994 work, *The Catcher Was a Spy: The Mysterious Life of Moe Berg*, takes a more critical stance toward the catcher's espionage contributions.<sup>11</sup> Dawidoff does suggest that Berg's associations and extensive travels during the 1930s and 1940s were more than simply the goodwill activities of an American ballplayer. But he also quotes a Berg associate as saying, "The only mystery about Moe Berg is that there is no mystery." Berg may have been considered an intelligence asset during the years of scurrying to build the OSS out of whatever rough hewn material was at hand. But he makes clear that Berg's utility did not extend beyond that to real work with the CIA in the postwar period.

Although the speculation continues, evidence suggests that Berg's adventures in the Japanese dreamland may have been more important than just a tourist's pleasure trip, although the excursion were never as important as Berg or some of his biographers have made them out to be. Espionage aside, Berg's views do provide a perspective of how those collective entities "Japan" and "the Japanese" were popularly regarded the early 1930s. It is instructive in not only what he saw, but how he saw it – how he glibly summed up an entire society – based on his comfortably blinkered life in the ritzy Ginza district of downtown Tokyo. The perspective has been captured in a letter to Berg's "Dear Famille." The document is located in the Moe Berg file at the Baseball Hall of Fame Library in Cooperstown. It is reproduced here without major changes to Berg's informal writing style.

Tokyo, Japan  
November 9, 1932

Dear Famille,

I have never enjoyed a visit or anything any more in my life than this one – Tomorrow will be the third week here and it is marvelous – new, novel, instructive and interesting. Please excuse me for not writing from Tokyo till now. We disembarked late after-noon October 20 at Yokohama – 90% of the people to greet the voyagers were in native, Japanese garb, that is kimonos, etc. No matter how much you read about this, it was a great surprise to see people in the streets with kimonos on – beautiful. Our party had a special car to take us to Tokyo, about  $\frac{3}{4}$  of an hour from Yokohama – so this was the orient – saw rikshaws and jinrikshawmen at the boat but the auto is driving them out – on the way. smelled some of the distinctive odors of Japan – the ride was a page out of a dream – streets, narrow, lined with shops, thousands of people going home from work on bicycles, street-cars packed with people, everybody moving – in fact, there are no Japanese loafers – everybody seems to work – have not seen one beggar yet.

The hotel is about 5 short blocks from the main street, that is one of them, of Tokyo, the Ginza. and a beautiful hotel, built by an American, Wright, who, I believe, went crazy – it withstood the earthquake of '23, built, I think, on rolling logs or some such effect, to move with the quakes. It is a 3-story, modern hotel with beautiful gardens and fountains and all the improvements of the Ritz-Carlton, etc. – a Japanese setting. Ted Lyons

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<sup>11</sup>Nicholas Dawidoff, *The Catcher Was a Spy: The Mysterious Life of Moe Berg* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1994).

and I are rooming together in a beautiful, quiet, modernistic room overlooking a fountain and gardens.

We were met at the boat by a dozen or so Japanese newspapermen and others connected with the University Baseball League here – they are a fine bunch of fellows, very accommodating, and are constantly with us to show us all favors and anything we want to do. The Japanese are a very courteous race of people – no shaking of hands in greeting among them; they bow almost right angles 3 or 4 times & while bowing they talk about the weather, how everybody is at home and then bow some more – very intriguing and interesting – I greet all my Japanese friends with bows now. They bow to say “hello” and again for “good-bye.”

The meals here are excellent – the milk is as good as anywhere – the meat is good, in fact everything – the water fine. I eat the same way I do at home except when I eat away from the hotel evenings which is very often – and then Japanese meals which I like – it consists of several courses all served almost together in small pots somewhat larger than tea-cups – a typical meal would be raw fish to dip in soya sauce (very tasty), duck (served in thin strips), lobster, mushroom soup, soba (little noodles in native soup) and always to end the meal, or with the meal, *gohan* or *rice*, native pickles & vegetables in a little jar in sauce along with it – not to forget ocha = tea – green tea, no sugar, no cream, no lemon – very good – and you eat with *hashi* or chopsticks & I am now almost an expert. And in order to show one's appreciation of the meal, especially the hot tea, you must inhale it with the noise of a steel-mill at full blast, sound your p's and q's, dot your i's, cross your t's and then when the food or drink has passed your gullet, you exhale a sound of satisfaction – and so your host or hostess knows you are enjoying the food. The Japanese are private eaters – in fact their homes are very private & sanctified – the homes are small, the floors covered with *tatami* or matting – shoes always come off before entering – the shape of my shoes is causing a sensation in Japan – you will see a typical Japanese room (*zashiki*) in a picture I am sending – there is a famous geisha quarters here called *shimbashi geisha*. From what I gather, geisha means one who works for art's sake – the geishas are trained to sing and dance Japanese songs & dances – & to serve tea & meals – a party will go to a tea house, get a private dining room & then, if the proprietors will phone the geisha (pronounced gayshuh) quarters for some geisha girls – they are down on their knees & up with trays – trained beautifully – Japanese songs are sing-songy, but nice and the dances are more or less poses-instead of motion.

Contrary to what is generally believed, the Japanese are a very clean race, especially the women – they bathe in extremely hot water, once or twice *every day* – & the women always look fresh, clean & there are some beautiful girls here – they all walk pigeon-toed like Mama and me – believe me, Mama would make a great Japanese lady in every way – fine black hair, about the right size and a good disposition like all these ladies here – everybody smiles here – they are pigeon toed because, I think,

when they kneel down to eat their toes crop one another in pigeon-toe fashion, thusly...– they wear all kinds of foot gear but all this style...or with little stilts on them, thusly...– worn at all times but the latter mostly in wet weather – men wear black socks. the women white walled *tabi* (tahbay) with thick soles i.e. like slipper soles, – the socks a just [sic], cover the ankles – I have never seen a girl or woman yet with soiled white socks – they are always immaculate – the kimonos are beautiful, all colors, all combinations – everybody wears 3 layers over the underwear – kimono next to underwear, a middle one, and outside one & they tell me the under ones more beautiful even than the outside ones – men's kimonos outside are dark colors, but the under ones fancy – colder weather – they wear a *haori* = sort of overcoat, like a short kimono. Women go bare-headed, men about 50-50 – the sock (tabe [sic]) is built so that there is an indenture between the big toe & the first toe and in this space comes the cord from the top of the shoe which keeps the shoes from falling off – there are also a good many who wear the shoes without socks, perfectly permissible especially students when wearing kimonos – some women – I forgot to say that when you enter a cafe or dining room, public or private. the waiters (always in kimonos) hands [sic] you a little basket with a hot rag to clean your hands and face – it dries automatically – also toothpicks are used extensively – it is a custom to pour beer or sake (sakay = pronunciation)= national rice liquor for your friend & he pours for you & to show friendship you drink out of the same little cup...– they tell me the younger the girl, the longer & more flowing must be the sleeves on her kimono.

All traffic is left here – & people pass you on the left in crowds – the traffic cops (except on the larger, wider streets where they have our system of red & green lights) use lanterns to direct traffic – the houses here are clean and immaculate – the weather this fall has been cloudy, rainy, & comfortably cool – the kind of weather I like-just like I spent in Paris in fall 1923 – enough sunny days too – they tell me an exceptionally rainy season – they use human excretions to richen the soil...there are thousands of cafes here, serving mostly beer (Japanese and German) & anything you want; all close at midnight out of respect to the emperor, I suppose, who wants to sleep at that hour – by the way the emperor has a large area of ground, completely surrounded by a moat about 75 feet wide – if a cafe has 16 tables. there are 16 native Japanese girls, kimonos et al. who sit down with you & serve you & talk to you – as one proprietor expressed it, a Japanese would consider it an evening lost if he didn't have a girl sit next to him and don't forget, the wife always stays at home & on the street you can find the husband a few paces ahead of the wife &; the man enters the home, the taxi etc. first – the Ginza (ginza) nicknamed by me GINZBERG is a fine broad street, the main street here in a large city of 6,000,000 people – lined with stores beautiful dep't stores, shops, cafes etc. – & a motley of colors – oriental & western dress & very few foreigners – there is a very good English language newspaper here the

“Advertiser” – all the important news – and two others – the Ginza is lined at night with stalls selling everything imaginable (only one side of the Ginza) from pictures & books to razors and curios – there are several beautiful parks here, chrysanthemums etc. The Japanese are a proud, very proud race, the old people are stately & everybody has good manners & a smile.

On account of rainy weather before we arrived, the league season here was continued & games are played about 3 or 4 times a week until November 20. We coach sometimes morning, sometimes afternoon and it is very interesting. The colleges here play the best baseball in Japan – there is no professional baseball – the six universities in Tokyo (all in the surrounding & outlying [*sic*] districts) play a two game series with each other – Spring & Fall – we are now in the Fall season. The SIX are WASEDA, MEIJI. HOSEI. RIKKIO. KEIO, and TEIKOKU (called Imperial University in English) – the boys are usually small – none as tall as I – but wonderful imitators & on the whole good students – they learn quickly – they are not good hitters & play well, what we call in the U.S., a passive game – instead of forcing the issue, they lie back to let the opponent beat himself. They all have individual fields. skin diamonds (no grass) but good and well kept – O'Doul coaches the hitters – I the catchers – Lyons the pitchers & after a couple of days, we play a game & stop it to correct faults as they come up – we are at each school 5 or 6 days – put on uniforms at the hotel & drive to ball grounds in a car – the league games are played at Meiji Shrine grounds and believe me, there is plenty of interest here – I have seen 40,000 at a game here already – the students all wear blue uniforms distinguishing their schools with a little emblem on their caps & coat collars – women go to the games – kimonos & all but western dress predominates at ball games – they have cheering sections like at our football games – no doubt about it, baseball is the national pasttime [*sic*] here – have seen two shows, one copied after combination Follies & musical show & very, very good – another last night, a typical Japanese show – interesting, but slow according to our standards – the actors were the Geishas (this is geisha week) – all girls acting traditional Japanese playlets – shows begin at 5 – everybody eats during the half hour & 20 minute intermissions – show over about 10:30 – They play ball Sundays here – shrines & no churches – will tell more about this in another letter shortly & about the universities & law courts – I am studying continuously in my spare time – MATSUMOTO, my age, teacher of English at Meiji Univ. is my close friend & teacher – I teach him French – more later –...– hope you are all well – cabled you yesterday – heard Roosevelt won – lucky – love,

Moe