

# How TOKYO shaped me



Wellendorff is celebrating a big anniversary in 2024: 50 years in Japan! Hanspeter Wellendorff identified the country early on as an attractive luxury market. His granddaughter Isabelle, who now heads the company's finance team, loved hearing his accounts from the faraway country. In 2019, she spent half a year in Tokyo – and tells us her story here.

By Isabelle Wellendorff

Photography: Sebastian Seidel, iStock.com

I will never forget the feeling when my father said goodbye to me and returned to Germany. Waving and with tears in my eyes, I stood in the Wellendorff boutique in Tokyo, where I would now be working for the next six months. Of course, there was a thrill of anticipation towards the exciting task ahead, the exotic country, new culture; but also uncertainty and fear of homesickness. My new colleagues immediately sensed what I was feeling. Before I could feel sadness, they took me in their arms and welcomed me into their circle. It was a beautiful feeling. Even though my family was so many hours away by plane, there was no worry of homesickness. Because I was now part of the Japanese Wellendorff family, and therefore part of our larger worldwide family.

I soon came up with an ambitious goal: to be able to speak Japanese so fluently that I would one day be able to sell a piece of jewellery. I studied for several hours every day, took language lessons before work and spoke as often as I could. Then one day, the time came: with a handwritten letter, I invited Ms Nakagawa, a customer who had not been to the boutique for a long time, to visit us. We tried different necklaces to find out which one suited her best. And while we were talking a little about the piece of jewellery, her family and her work, she suddenly said: "I would like to buy the necklace." At first, I wasn't sure if I had understood correctly, but my colleague's proud smile confirmed what I suspected. To this day, I'm not sure who was happiest: the customer because she was treating herself to this special piece of jewellery, my colleague because she had trained me so well, or me because it was my first sale in Japanese. Ms Nakagawa often visited me in the boutique and we are still in contact today.

These personal encounters and relationships alone made my time in Japan so valuable. I am happy and grateful that my grandfather Hanspeter told me so much about his experiences and connections to this country. He was, along with my father, the driving force behind me going to Tokyo. Of course, he had experienced a completely different city, a completely different country, when he was in Japan 50 years ago. Instead of skyscrapers, there were simple, small houses; instead of prosperity there was poverty – an international flair was missing. The most important thing for



him was a small, handwritten note with Japanese characters. On it was the hotel he had to return to every evening. Even back then, he was impressed by the politeness and helpfulness of the people, which I also find so mind-blowing today. Nobody spoke English, but everyone still tried to help him, asking as many other people as necessary until they got an answer, or accompanying my grandfather until he found his way.

My grandfather always told me that the Japanese and the Germans are closely connected. The roots of their relationship date back to the 17th century. In addition to the economic and political alliances, for him it was, above all, the similar mentality and the interest in German culture along with the appreciation of our craftsmanship that created the special closeness with our nations. When he first travelled to Japan, the island nation was just opening up to the luxury market and he saw an opportunity for our company to further internationalise. It all started with an importer from Germany who helped him deliver the jewellery to Japan – to the best address – Mikimoto, the purveyor to the imperial court and inventor of the cultured pearl. This business relationship grew over many years and my grandfather regularly travelled to the Land of the Rising Sun. Since my father also developed this love for Tokyo, it was a no-brainer that after opening the first Wellendorff boutiques in Germany, we would also open our own boutique in the Japanese capital.

I was now working in this very boutique. Here, I learned all the tasks of a Wellendorff jewellery consultant: from daily inventory to attending various customer events and press appointments for a Wellendorff exhibition. What I found interesting was that in Japan, shopping behaviour is often very different from ours in Germany. Firstly, women tend to decide much more independently what they want, and usually by themselves. In many families, women also manage the money. Another option in Japan is to use “Gaishos”, who are per-

sonal shoppers. They advise customers on which brands to choose, what to give their wives for their birthdays, and the latest trends. Customers trust the Gaishos and their recommendations entirely.

This trust, which is based on the Japanese people's exceptional politeness and honesty, was very special to me. As was Japan's deep, sincere interest in other cultures. Recognition and admiration of our traditional craftsmanship and our pieces of jewellery, attention to detail, and perfection all make us feel good about our work. Commitment and helpfulness are also qualities that create such a pleasant atmosphere among each other. The word “no” is not used in the Japanese language. This completely changes the way of thinking and the mood. Instead of saying no, Japanese people really try everything to fulfil a wish and not disappoint the other person. Decency and respect are extremely important to them. This includes bowing. When I returned to Germany, I had to break this habit because people look at you very strangely here. But I am grateful to people around me for their help, big or small, for

nice moments shared together or simply for being who they are – this is a basic sentiment that I still carry with me today.

I also took the Japanese people's modesty and consideration to heart. These values were particularly helpful in my private life because living together in a shared house is challenging enough as it is. Imagine a small single-family home with 15 young people living in it instead of three or four. My room was about ten square metres. I shared it with my roommate. Everyone had their own bunk bed, a small table and a clothes rack underneath – that was it. Space is very limited in Tokyo. 37 million people live here, almost half of Germany's population. But this closeness has its benefits. It makes this city a paradise of mindfulness. There is no pushing or shoving and, out of consideration for other passengers, no one uses their mobile phone on the metro.

**“I find the politeness and helpfulness of the Japanese to be mind-blowing.”**



### Exclusive jewellery oasis: THE WELLENDORFF BOUTIQUE IN TOKYO

In 2014, Wellendorff opened its first boutique in Japan – at an exclusive address in The Ritz-Carlton Hotel Tokyo. Since then, discerning jewellery enthusiasts have been able to discover fine craftsmanship from Pforzheim in the Roppongi district of the Asian metropolis. The treasures made of 18-karat gold are presented in a charming feel-good environment bathed in bright, warm colours.

This includes the TOKYO ring, which is only available in the Japanese capital. In addition to the boutique, Wellendorff is represented in Tokyo in the largest and most famous department stores: Mitsukoshi, Isetan and Wako, as well as at the jeweller Yoshida.

#### TOKYO ring.

This ring, boasting rose-coloured Wellendorff cold enamel, is engraved with cherry blossoms. They express the full beauty of nature, making the cherry blossom one of the most important symbols of Japanese culture.

Kaede, a Japanese medical student, also lived in our shared house. She worked day and night and hardly had a spare minute. But she still took the time to cook with me and show me Japan. One day, she said that because I was always so enthusiastic about work, she really wanted to visit me in the Wellendorff boutique. After she arrived she surprised me with what she said: “If I ever get married, I would like to get married with Wellendorff rings.” I didn't really take it seriously at the time because she didn't have a boyfriend or much money. But about a year later, I received a photo from Kaede – herself, her fiancé and two Wellendorff rings. She had kept her word, just as Japanese people do.



First a friend and later a customer: Isabelle with her Japanese roommate Kaede.