



## THREE MEN WHO WERE RIGHT

By ERWIN JAHN

*Japan has been much misunderstood by the outer world. Otherwise there would probably have been neither a Port Arthur nor a Pearl Harbor. The main reason for this misunderstanding seems to us to be the fact that most foreign observers saw Japan through the eyes of their own Western civilization and squeezed their impressions into Western conceptions and systems in the assumption that all men are alike and that Western opinions are the only correct ones.*

*However, not all observers have made this mistake. The following article deals with three men who, living at different times during a period of two hundred and fifty years, correctly understood the spirit of Japan and interpreted it to the West. It is partly due to their efforts that the country whose sons they were, Germany, had a proper estimation of Japan, while England and America, in spite of their much larger number of Japanologues, were proved wrong in their judgment.*

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**E**XACTLY two hundred and fifty years ago, in 1692, an obscure ship's surgeon in the employ of the Dutch East India Company left Japan after a stay of two years. He was to be the first European to light the torch of knowledge and understanding of Japan in Europe. Curiously enough, he was followed by two other physicians who carried on the work their predecessor had started. All three of them made a deep study of the Japanese nation and succeeded in understanding it better, perhaps, than any other Westerners of their times. Through their writings they awakened admiration in Europe for the achievements of the Japanese nation.

The names of these three men were Engelbert Kämpfer, Philipp Franz von Siebold, and Erwin Baelz. They are not grouped together at random. They form a chain in which one passed the torch of understanding on to the next. Kämpfer was the first by a hundred and thirty years. There can be no

doubt that Siebold was spurred on by the great example of Kämpfer in his voyage to Japan and in his penetrating study of the Japanese people; he could not have chosen a better teacher. And Baelz, who followed Siebold fifty years later, always referred to the opinions of his predecessors when it was necessary to combat erroneous ideas about Japan.

### UNRECOGNIZED GREATNESS

Outwardly, Kämpfer was only an insignificant ship's doctor, and even later he did not achieve anything like fame in his lifetime. Actually he was an explorer of the highest order. Born in 1651, in Lemgo, Germany, and living between the periods of Baroque and Enlightenment, he shared much with the most brilliant brains of that time in the Occident: versatility, insatiability in learning, openness of mind, and a combination of audacity and cautiousness of thought. Although prob-

ably shy and at first clumsy, his thirst for knowledge drove him from one university to the next and later from one country to the next, and gradually fostered in him a fearlessness which knew no obstacles. A devout Christian, he nevertheless recognized other faiths; a European and a German, he was yet not blind to the individuality and the right to it of the Asiatic countries. Ready to teach, he still preferred to learn. One could hardly imagine anyone better qualified at that time to penetrate the spirit of Japan, the least known of the great nations in modern history.

It seems almost a miracle that Kämpfer was ever able to get as far as Japan. In 1683 he traveled to Persia via Russia as a member of a Swedish embassy, arriving in Isfahan in 1684. Since his thirst for discovery was not yet quenched and no special career was awaiting him at home, he entered the service of the Dutch East India Company when the Swedish embassy was dissolved in Isfahan. He spent several terrible years on the Persian Gulf; disease and the murderous climate threatened to put an early end to his endeavors. Then came months on the Malabar coast and in Java. Kämpfer had no success in Batavia, and that—but not that alone—decided him to apply for transfer to Japan, to which country the Dutch were the only Westerners to have at least limited access during its period of seclusion. The voyage there gave him an opportunity to spend some weeks in Siam. He remained in Japan for two years, from November 1690 to October 1692; the monotony of his life at the trading station on the tiny island of Deshima in the harbor of Nagasaki was broken by two fruitful journeys to Yedo (now Tokyo).

Kämpfer did not reach Europe till October 1693 after a voyage around the Cape. Thus he had been abroad for ten years, in remote countries, traveling under conditions of discomfort and exertion which we can hardly imagine today.

It is characteristic of the unsatisfactory political, economic, and cultural conditions

in the Germany of that time that Kämpfer, when he had finally returned, could not find any worth-while position at home. He was burning to tell the world what he had seen and discovered; but he had to spend his time as a court physician to the German Count of Lippe and in the administration of an estate inherited from his father. Although these occupations were by no means ignoble, they kept him from fulfilling his life's mission. Not until 1712, that is, nineteen years after his return, could he publish in his home town of Lemgo the great work entitled *Amoenitates Exoticae*, his first scientific report on his travels. However, only a few chapters of this work dealt with Japan. One of the founders of European understanding of Japan, Kämpfer did not live to see his name linked with Japan; the year 1716 put an end to his days, careworn to the last.

The valuable scientific notes which he left behind now entered upon a strange career. They were sold to England and are still kept in the British Museum, as far as they have been preserved. Kämpfer's chief work was first published in England in 1727 under the title of *History of Japan and Siam*, and in 1777 a complete German edition (*Geschichte und Beschreibung von Japan*) appeared. Only then did Germany begin to realize what kind of a man Kämpfer had been; and it was left to our age, with its new conceptions of geography and politics, to grasp his true greatness.



#### THE "MOUNTAIN DUTCHMAN"

Siebold's stay in Japan, a century and a half later, was, seen as a whole, a repetition of Kämpfer's experiences but under far more favorable conditions. Siebold was also a physician in the service of the Dutch East India Company, but had a higher rank and was more

respected than Kämpfer. Siebold bore the name of a family of physicians and professors of highest repute in Germany for many generations. He was born in Würzburg in 1796 and thus, when he arrived in Nagasaki in 1823 after a few months in Batavia, he was more than ten years younger than Kämpfer had been upon his arrival. He was not exhausted by long voyages, and traveling itself had meanwhile become much safer and more comfortable. But, above all, Siebold came from a Germany which had given brilliant indications of her newly arising strength in the wars against Napoleon, and which looked back on decades of cultural splendor. However, just like Kämpfer, Siebold was not known as a German in Japan; curious as it may sound, he was known as a "mountain Dutchman" on account of his poor command of Dutch at that time.

When, after a stay of almost six and a half years in Japan, Siebold returned to Holland in 1830, no one in Europe could dispute his reputation as the best living expert on Japan and the hitherto greatest pioneer in the scientific study of Japan. No one would have dared doubt his authority after the publication of his chief works, *Flora Japonica*, *Fauna Japonica*, and *Nippon*. The honors denied Kämpfer were heaped on Siebold in Germany and all of Europe. Nevertheless, there remained something unsatisfied in his life, too. The blame was not his but was to be found in the still unsatisfactory political conditions in Germany. When Siebold, a Bavarian citizen from Würzburg, went to Japan for the second time in 1859, in order to take a political part in the opening up of Japan, his efforts at advice and intervention ended in failure. This could not have been otherwise, since Siebold was not able to represent a powerful, united empire. When Siebold died in 1865, the new German Empire was yet to be formed.

#### PROFESSOR AND PHYSICIAN

In comparison with the colorful and adventurous careers of Kämpfer and Siebold, that of the physician Baelz appears simple and commonplace. This was a consequence of the period in which he lived, the second half of the nineteenth century, which for Europe was like a pause for breath before great events. As we know today, this is also true fundamentally of Japan; but at the same time this period was for Japan one of unrest and decisions, so that even Baelz's quiet private life was surrounded by storm and tension. The fact that he understood the events seething around him and foresaw what was coming with remarkable intuition, lifts his life out of the commonplace.

Baelz (born in Biebigheim, Germany, in 1849) came to Japan in 1876 at the age of twenty-seven, the same age at which Siebold had arrived there. He spent the greater part of his life in Japan. In 1901 he celebrated his twenty-fifth anniversary as Professor of Internal Diseases at the Imperial University in Tokyo. He was also the medical adviser of several members of the Imperial House. In 1904 he returned to Germany, where he died in 1913.

In contrast to the universal scholars and natural scientists Kämpfer and Siebold, Baelz, who was chiefly a teaching and practising physician, did not write or leave behind any great works on Japan. But in a number of articles he proved that he had fathomed the Japanese soul to its innermost recesses. In his short essay *Über den kriegerischen Geist und die Todesverachtung der Japaner* (On the Warrior Spirit and Contempt of Death of the Japanese) there is more knowledge and foresight than in many copious volumes on Japan by other authors. If we add to this the intensely interesting diary which was compiled from his papers and published by his son Toku (its English translation appeared under the title *Awakening Japan* in New York in 1932), we need not hesitate to rank Baelz's name alongside Kämpfer's and Siebold's.



Baelz was only one of many Germans living in Japan during the Meiji Era who deserve attention and recognition for their achievements; but Baelz is distinguished from the others by his clear foresight. Those who read Baelz's above-mentioned essay, written in 1904, and recognize all its implications, cannot be surprised at Japan's outstanding successes. This essay is a document of the greatest political and cultural significance and, although a product of the moment, it is timeless, and still valid today.



#### ALMOST A UTOPIA

The wealth of material contributing to the knowledge of Japan collected by Kämpfer und Siebold under the most unfavorable conditions still evokes the admiration of all Japanologues. The medical teaching activity developed by Siebold and Baelz in Japan is still gratefully acknowledged by Japanese medical science. But we are not concerned with this aspect of their work. We are interested here only in the deep understanding revealed by these three men for Japan. It can be traced to the following three cardinal elements.

They realized, first, that Japan possesses a highly developed culture whose individuality cannot be doubted, in spite of some things having been adopted from outside. Secondly, they acknowledged that Japan has an absolute right to direct her policy according to her own will. And finally, they recognized ardent patriotism and heroic disregard of one's own life to be the main characteristics of the Japanese soul.

It should not be believed that it was easy for Kämpfer, Siebold, and Baelz to arrive at these conclusions, however natural they may seem to us in 1942. Kämpfer, the son of a clergyman, was deeply influenced by Christian ideas; at any rate, he had to consider his Christian readers. But never so much as by a word did he reproach the Japanese for not being

"Christian." On the contrary, he maintained that the policy of the Tokugawa Period, which was directed against Christianity, was justified for domestic reasons. Again and again he stressed that the striving for a moral way of living and for purity of the soul was "much greater" on the part of the Japanese than among Christian peoples. The law-abiding nature of the Japanese, their politeness, their eagerness to learn, their cleanliness, are constantly emphasized by him.

It would be hard to imagine a greater admirer of Japan than Kämpfer. He declares the Japanese to be a "noble nation," and his description of Japan, especially in the *Amoenitates*, appears almost like the design for a Utopia. Kämpfer has later been accused of going too far in his adulation and of having been guided by the desire to startle and dumfound his readers. This is partly correct. Kämpfer wanted to show his Christian contemporaries that even a non-Christian nation could very well possess a high culture which could even surpass that of the Christian nations. But it cannot be doubted that he was quite honest in his admiration of Japan.



#### CULTURE MORE THAN KNOWLEDGE

Conditions in this respect were easier for Siebold. He came from the classical-romantic period, when men like Herder and Goethe in Germany had enhanced men's power of appreciation of the individuality as well as the individual rights of foreign peoples and cultures. But he lived in a century in which natural science and engineering were making tremendous progress and were gradually gaining first place in men's estimation. Japan at that time must necessarily have seemed backward in that respect. Yet this by no means deterred Siebold from recognizing the advanced stage of Japanese

culture and from calling the Japanese people "the most educated of the non-European world." In his praise of Japanese culture and the Japanese people, which seems to him like a "vast, well-brought up, obedient family," Siebold is just as enthusiastic as Kämpfer. After all, culture meant far more to this son of a Würzburg professor than just knowledge; that which the Japanese lacked at that time in scientific and technical knowledge could, according to Siebold, be easily learnt, and he, for his part, did his best to help in the transmitting of this knowledge.

When Baelz was in Japan, he had not only to argue constantly with foreigners who had no eyes for the greatness and cultural individuality of Japan; he also met with Japanese in the early Meiji Era who sometimes overshot the mark in the adopting of European ideas and customs. He knew, however, "that it is in the interest of Japan to maintain a strict individuality and to possess things which are possessed by all Japanese and which belong to them alone in all the world." Japan's great political and military successes did not surprise him, as he had correctly appraised the Japanese national character. The manner in which the Japanese behaved in victory aroused his sincere admiration. "We Germans once again express our amazement at the quiet, dignified, and modest behavior of the Japanese," he noted in his diary on March 23, 1905, after Russia's defeat at Mukden. It was only natural for Baelz to occupy himself as widely as possible with Japanese culture, as far as his practice and professorial duties permitted.



#### CORRECT POLITICAL DEDUCTIONS

All three of these German pioneers of understanding of Japan, though primarily scientists, had a decided sense of politics. As we have already said, it was for them a fundamental truth that Japan was

unquestionably entitled to form her policy solely according to her own opinions. Of course, it depended on the situation obtaining in each case what, in their opinion, constituted the interest of Japanese policy.

In Kämpfer's times, Japan, for reasons of principle, shut herself off from all political communication with foreign countries. The German observer not only thought this procedure permissible but approved of it with all his heart. The main chapter on Japan in his *Amoenitates*, "Proving that there are very good reasons in the Japanese Empire for forbidding the inhabitants to leave the country, foreign nations to enter, and all communication between this country and the rest of the world," is written entirely in this vein, as the title shows. Since Japan was economically independent, and since the Japanese population was highly civilized and happy, Kämpfer could see nothing but discontent and confusion arising from a possible connection with the outer world. Moreover, for geographical reasons and because of the courage of the people, he believed Japan to be impregnable; he therefore emphatically spurned European wishes for an "opening up" of the Island Empire.

In this, as in nearly all other questions, Siebold at first definitely took Kämpfer's part, although he supported a more widespread adoption of the natural sciences, which were more highly developed in Europe. Later, when he realized that Japan's isolation could not be maintained much longer, he warned the European states not to attempt to use force, which, as he well knew, would be useless against the heroism of the Japanese. He obviously thought it best for the transition from Japan's isolation to communication with other nations to take place gradually and in complete agreement. It was in order to be of use here that Siebold undertook his second voyage to Japan.

Baelz saw Japan rapidly advancing to one of the first places in the world, and realized that this development had by no means reached its pinnacle. His efforts were directed towards opening the

eyes of Germany's diplomatic representatives to this process, and his most cherished wish was to see Japan and Germany co-operating politically. He did not live to see his dream fulfilled, but, even from a political point of view, he can definitely be regarded as one of the founders of Japanese-German co-operation.



#### TRUE UNDERSTANDING

Still more important than the first two points is the third one, namely, that Kämpfer, Siebold, and Baelz tried to penetrate to the very heart of the Japanese people with their understanding and in this way arrived at interpretations, the truth of which has been confirmed by subsequent events. All three of them found the secret of Japanese strength and invincibility to be in the burning patriotism of the Japanese and their unhesitating determination to sacrifice their lives. We must take these words in their fullest significance, otherwise their true meaning escapes us.

Kämpfer never had an opportunity to see the Japanese at war or in a feud. But he was able to witness the indifference with which condemned men met their death, and, above all, he knew the mentality and the history of the Japanese. "With noble contempt toward life and with stoical courage, they do not hesitate to take their own lives whenever they have been defeated by enemies or are unable to avenge some disgrace they may have suffered." Not many years after Kämpfer had left Japan, the Forty-seven Ronins proved once again that the Japanese know how to avenge an insult by the sacrifice of their own lives. And the following prediction of Kämpfer's has also repeatedly been proved correct: "It is certain that posterity will never experience a time when this nation is lacking in sagacity, courage, order, and obedience in war time . . . . The Japanese are constantly inspired by the living memory of the great deeds of their an-

cestors, and in this way never cease to uphold their spirit and their courage."

The fact that Japanese patriotism is at the same time an unshakeable bond with the Imperial House, in other words, that it is also always service for the Emperor, was one which Kämpfer did not yet fully realize because of the conditions of those times. Siebold, on the other hand, was in Japan at a time when the veneration of the Emperor was being re-established in all its ancient purity. It is a sign of the depth of his understanding that he immediately grasped this process. "The Japanese," he wrote, "is enthusiastic about his country and proud of the great deeds of his ancestors; the educated as well as the common man possesses boundless devotion for the ancient dynasty of the Emperor and is greatly attached to the old rites, the old manners and customs."

Later on, when it was a question of abolishing the system of the shogunate and of re-establishing the direct government of the Emperor, Siebold was one of the first Europeans, if not the first, to foresee this development. He urgently advised the European powers to adjust themselves to this change in Japan. Even before that, he had admonished the European states not to foster any possible ideas of expansion at the expense of Japan and not to underestimate the Japanese power of resistance. "We must warn against approaching the Japanese coast with foolhardy plans born out of the pressure of the present century, in which the expansion of free trade has become a question of life and death. Such plans will only founder on the rocks of the unshakeable patriotism of so brave a people, on the rocks of a blind obedience toward authority."



#### UNHEEDED WARNINGS

Baelz lived to see the confirmation of that which Kämpfer and Siebold had

predicted. He saw Japanese soldiers gain brilliant victories on the battlefield—and he was not surprised. Nevertheless, he sought for the innermost reason for these successes, and he found them in the union between the principle of loyalty and an incomparable contempt of death, or rather, of life. “The essential thing about the Japanese soldier is his wonderful contempt of death.” And: “Nowhere else has the calculated contempt of life on the battlefield become so much part of a system as in Japan.” The Japanese, Baelz finds, eliminates all other feelings in battle: he thinks only of destroying the enemy, and he does not even consider sparing his own life. And it seems obvious to Baelz “that a man who is bound by no consideration whatever to his own life or that of others, whose sole thought is the enemy opposing him and whom he wants to vanquish, is a more dangerous opponent than a man in whose breast, in spite of all courage, there are still other feelings.” This heroism, says Baelz, is “a Spartan conception, one which is dangerous for the enemy.” For its own country, however, in this case for Japan,

it is the best guarantee for its invincibility, its eternal existence, and the great part which it is destined to play in the world.

Thus the third of the three German interpreters of Japan confirmed that which the first of them realized two hundred and fifty years ago; and he might have written the same impressive sentence which Kämpfer once wrote: “For whom in all the world has Japan to fear except Almighty God?”

There is much that is similar in the nature of the German and the Japanese; and it is this kinship which has probably aided the three Germans Kämpfer, Siebold, and Baelz to understand the Japanese soul in a way which permits us to speak of a “German interpretation of the Japanese spirit.” Past history and the present time have revealed that this interpretation is the correct one. The fact that the present enemies of Japan and Germany have been blind to the spirit of Japan seems just as inevitable as the fact that the Germans acknowledged it and have drawn the proper conclusions from it.

