

Review of: *Dietrich Seckel, Berichte aus Japan: Briefe an seine Mutter. Hiroshima 1936 bis Tokyo/Urawa 1941*, edited by Hans-Joachim Bieber, Munich: Iudicium, 2020 (ISBN 978-3-86205-052-9)

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『*Dietrich Seckel, Berichte aus Japan: Briefe an seine Mutter. Hiroshima 1936 bis Tokyo/Urawa 1941*, edited by Hans-Joachim Bieber, Munich: Iudicium, 2020 (ISBN 978-3-86205-052-9)』 についての書評

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### Introduction

Dietrich Seckel (1910-2007) was employed at three “old-style” Japanese high schools (*kyūsei kōtōgakkō*) in Hiroshima (1936-39), Urawa (1939-42) and Tokyo (1942-45). He also taught at the army cadet school in Hiroshima (1937-39) and Tokyo Imperial University (1939-42) as an adjunct lecturer. The voluminous hardcover book (618 pages) under review here, features a selection of around 80 letters, postcards, and telegrams that Seckel sent to his mother, offering valuable insights into the life of a foreign teacher in early Shōwa Japan.

Many of these letters were written over several days and are very substantial. On average, the consecutively numbered letters encompass between six and seven pages, some are up to three times as long. In the book, they are presented like standard text with each letter featuring its (above-mentioned) number, place, and date, along with opening and closing remarks/greetings.

The correspondence (which involved more than 200 letters etc. in total) abruptly ends after the German surprise attack on the USSR of June 22, 1941, severed the Trans-Siberian Railroad link between the two Axis powers. Thus, Seckel's time at a private high school in Tokyo is not covered in the book, which exclusively features Seckel's letters, rendering the flow of information one-directional from Japan to Germany.

### **Dietrich Seckel's move from Berlin to Hiroshima**

Dietrich Seckel grew up in “Weimar” Berlin, where he studied German literature and art history. His father Emil (1864-1924) had been a renowned law professor at Berlin University, whose book collection was acquired by Tohoku Imperial University (Sendai, p. 157, 413). In 1935, Dietrich's elder brother Helmut lost his job as a senior physician at a Berlin hospital because his wife was Jewish. They managed to emigrate to the USA in 1936, the year Dietrich handed in his dissertation on Hölderlin. The Seckel family thus had some first-hand experience of the destructive effects of Hitler's aggressive interior policy.

A coincidence helped Seckel to get his first position in Japan. Walter Donat, who - like Seckel - had been supervised by Julius Petersen during his doctoral studies, was in Germany to hand in his “*Habilitationsschrift*” (postdoctoral dissertation) in Japanese studies and was searching for a successor at Hiroshima High School. Donat had turned into an aggressive Nazi while teaching in Hiroshima (1925-35) and was thus a somewhat surprising sponsor for Seckel. The fact that Donat was able to arrange for Seckel to take over his former position suited both men very well. Seckel could leave Germany, and Donat hoped that he had set a precedent by convincing the headmaster of the Hiroshima school to follow his advice (p. 127). The hiring of German high school teachers was a bone of contention between the Japanese and the Nazis (p. 163, 165). Nevertheless, Seckel soon realized that only very few Germans in Japan understood the role of the *kyūsei kōtōgakkō* within the contemporary Japanese educational system (p. 128).

Seckel made sure to avoid anything that might have looked like criticizing National Socialism. Like most other German high school instructors in Japan, Seckel joined the Nazi Teachers' League (NSLB) and later accepted crucial organizational roles within it (p. 325, 374, 397-398). In 1941, he even joined the Nazi Party (NSDAP), a fact that may or may not have been a means to disguise his real political stance, which was that of a conservative fellow traveler, who was impressed by Hitler's foreign policy “successes” of the late 1930s (p. 380).

### **Letters and photographs**

Seckel had kept carbon copies of his typewriter-written letters and even composed short summaries of the few that he wrote by hand. After Seckel's death, his correspondence, as well

as the photographs taken in Japan, were handed over to Heidelberg University, which made 970 pictures available online, each of them with a caption that explains what or who is depicted. They can be perused at <https://heidicon.uni-heidelberg.de/search?p=75&ot=objekte>. Many of these photos are reprinted in the book (no. 1 to 175), several of which show high school life as seen by Seckel. Photographs 17-19 (p. 71) and 32 (p. 177) provide a look at Hiroshima High School; Seckel's colleagues from that school can be seen in pictures 21 (p. 114), 37 (p. 187), 82 (p. 223), and 89/90 (p. 226). His students are depicted in many situations in photographs 20 (p. 107), 77/78 (p. 223), 91 (p. 234), and 93-95 (p. 283, 300). On page 226, there are three photos (85-88) depicting students and teachers playing baseball. Students were also playing tennis, practicing jiu-jitsu (judo), archery, and kendo as well as competing with other schools in rowing events (p. 142, 152, 161, 267). Considering the contemporary Japanese paranoia regarding foreign spies taking pictures in Japan (p. 57, 75-76, 81, 156, 250, 421, 437-438, 474-475, 504), it is astonishing that Seckel was allowed to take pictures during some military training activities of his students (pictures 79-81, p. 223). Later, this would have been impossible.

### **German language teaching at the *kyūsei kōtōgakkō***

Initially, Seckel was very keen on teaching German (p. 93, 168-169) and interacting with his students (p. 93, 142, 207-208), who visited him at his home to talk with him in German and to listen to classical music (pp. 158-160, 206). He remained very popular among his students in Hiroshima until he left for Urawa (pp. 366-367). At Urawa High School, the frequency of students' visits to his house was lower, but sometimes he mentions their discussions with him (p. 383, 394). In a letter dated April 24, 1937 (pp. 137-139), Seckel described his teaching at Hiroshima High School as well as at the local cadet school in some detail. In this summary for his mother, he complains about the antiquated language teaching methods by his Japanese colleagues, which forced their students to read German classics before they were even able to understand simple spoken sentences. The latter fact made Seckel's professional life difficult because his classes had to be conducted in German. He realized more and more that the only possible way of teaching was to simplify all aspects of German language and culture to get at least the basics across (p. 207). At times, he combines related complaints with exaggerated praise for German empathy and sensitivity (p. 230), which - according to him - neither Japanese (*ibid.*) nor Anglo-Saxons (p. 104, 270) had.

High school students had passed very competitive exams (p. 123), but their hairstyle and way of dressing showcased their scruffiness ("*Ruppigkeit*") (pp. 188-189, 396), which was generally accepted by teachers and society. Yet, there were limits to the freedom of high school students: Sometime before Seckel had come to Hiroshima, 15 students had been dismissed because they

adhered to communist ideas (p. 120). When one of his students committed suicide, Seckel informed his mother that such incidences were happening rather frequently at Japanese high schools (p. 142).

### **Seckel's experience at the Hiroshima cadet school**

Not surprisingly, teaching at the cadet school differed from that at a high school. Army cadets were younger but more disciplined. Also, Seckel noticed that the school facilities were better at the cadet school (p. 183), a fact that he directly linked to the enormous political clout of the military in contemporary Japan. In-class procedures resembled military drill: Any time Seckel came into the classroom, one of the cadets would order his fellow students to stand up. He would then report the date, the class, the number of students present, etc. When Seckel addressed one of his students in-class, the cadet would stand up, answer his question, and would then wait for Seckel's order to sit down again (pp. 138-139). Despite the stiffness of the classroom atmosphere, some of them "dared" to visit Seckel at home as well (p. 257).

Seckel did not only teach at the cadet school but was also invited to school events and visitations (p. 142, 334); like all other teachers of that school, he got the same presents (p. 294) and a year-end bonus (p. 282, 369). He was even involved in the hiring process of an additional Japanese German teacher (p. 246, 265), something unthinkable at the high school, although he worked full-time there and only part-time at the cadet school. Overall, Seckel felt more accepted at the cadet school than at the high school (p. 282, 369-370). He also met the head of the Hiroshima branch of the military police, Colonel Miura, various times because the latter was interested in Germany (p. 76, 81-82, 102-103). Furthermore, teaching at the cadet school entitled Seckel to a 40% reduction on train tickets (p. 123, 158) and turned out to be very helpful whenever Japanese police stopped or questioned him (p. 278).

### **Problems of German teaching in early Shōwa Japan**

After a few years of experience, teaching German became a slightly boring routine (p. 467, 485, 489, 504), partly because Seckel got increasingly disillusioned by the established language education system that focused on memorizing, reading and translating rather than on speaking (p. 335, 472). Later, while teaching at Urawa High School and Tokyo Imperial University, he applied this system to his advantage by asking students to translate German texts into Japanese, an exercise that he used to improve his Japanese language skills (p. 497).

Because his students lacked a general understanding of German affairs and were very shy to use their limited German language ability, Seckel had to adapt his university classes as well (pp. 388-391, 394-395, see also 449). Noteworthy is his explanation for the relatively low level of

the German majors at the Imperial University (p. 395, original in German, author's translation): "You will be interested to hear that students of German studies in Japan are mostly second to fifth-rate spirits. [...] The best students of the *kōtōgakkō*, [...] and also the best German experts, mostly study law or economics, after their good knowledge of German allowed them to pass the entrance exams, in which German plays an outstanding role. And those who speak German less well, then end up studying German language and literature. That is paradoxical." Accordingly, the German majors did not participate in a German Studies Research Group ("Arbeitsgemeinschaft"), which was mostly run by Law and Medicine majors (pp. 390-391, 435-436). Overall, Seckel was disappointed about his experience at Tokyo Imperial University. Besides the level of his students, what bothered him, was the lack of interest in him and other German colleagues by Japanese scholars of German studies (p. 485). He felt like the fifth wheel on the wagon (p. 394). At first, he was thinking about offering a seminar for the teaching staff (p. 395) but gave up on this after consulting with some long-term Japan residents (p. 436).

### **A new career path: studying Japanese art**

The less effort Seckel put into his language teaching, the more he focused on Japanese art (p. 465, 485), mainly traditional architecture (p. 472). He later used his holidays to visit famous temples and shrines and read books about related topics. Due to his extensive travels from Hokkaidō to Kyūshū and from Shikoku to Matsue, he saw more places than most other contemporary foreign residents. After World War II, Seckel - like most other Germans in Japan - was repatriated in 1947. Soon afterward, he convinced Heidelberg University to accept several of his earlier works, published during his time in Japan in lieu of the usual "*Habilitationschrift*." The former Nazi party member passed de-Nazification despite his work for the NSLB's Japan branch and became an outside lecturer (*Privatdozent*) at the university's Institute of Art History. Later, he was able to set up a department of East Asian Art History, which he headed for about twenty years until 1976. Even though he was promoted to full professor only shortly before his retirement, Seckel is considered one of the founders of East Asian Art History in Germany. The letters Seckel sent to his mother between 1936 and 1941 chronicle the turn of his focus from German literature to East Asian Art History and provide some insight into Japanese foreign language teaching in the early Shōwa era.