

( 弁 論 )

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## My 8000 km journey

"Саме найкраще не можна побачити а тільки відчутти серцем."

Hello, everyone. When you first saw me walk on stage, I bet you thought I was an American, right? Maybe you thought, "How can an American be in this speech contest!?!". Well... guess what, I'm not American, Canadian, nor Australian. Often my white skin makes people think I speak English. But I'm here today to both break this stereotype and teach a little about my wonderful heritage.

I'm from Ukraine, but I came 8,000 km to Japan when I was four years old. Even though I have lived here for more than ten years, people often stare at me with curiosity. Sometimes high school students say "Hello" to me. I usually just respond back "Hello," because if I say "Konichiwa," they respond, "Wow, he speaks Japanese. Great! Let's ask him something in Japanese." This situation is such a pain in the neck, and it actually makes me embarrassed. I'm safer just filling the stereotype with a "Hello."

But it gets worse. My classmates who know me and know I come from Ukraine still sometimes say "Please speak in English." My classmates, I really value all of you, but why do you treat me like this? You know me. Slavik, from Ukraine. Ukraine, where they speak ... Ukrainian! Not English. I learn English the same way as all of you, by studying! It's because of things like this I sometimes feel a big gulf between us like the distance from Japan to Ukraine.

I'm very proud of where I was born. Today I would like to tell you a little about Ukraine. It is an agricultural country and the biggest country entirely in Europe. When I was 10 years old, I went to the Ukrainian countryside with my family on vacation. I got up in the morning, and took a walk with a cow in the vast sunflower field. I climbed trees and ate nuts from the top. When it was hot, I swam in the pond. But can you believe this: I did all this in my underwear! I can only imagine walking down the street in Japan like that!

Ukrainians are very kind like Japanese people. If you ask them the way, they will take you there themselves. The only thing is that they have a "time disease." Their perception of time is very different from people here. Japanese people are very punctual. If they promise to meet at one o'clock, they come five minutes before one. If they are late even one minute, they apologize. Ukrainians don't care even if they are late by 30 minutes. My mother has this time disease. My father calls it Ukrainian time. Luckily I came to Japan before I caught this time disease.

As I said, there are many cultural differences between Japan and Ukraine. But it's very important to understand the differences and accept them. I often remember this phrase. "Саме найкраще не можна побачити а тільки відчутти серцем." It is a famous quote by Saint-Exupéry that means "It is only with the heart that one can see rightly; what is essential is invisible to the eye." I'm trying not to judge a person by their appearance or because of stereotypes. I'm trying to see the world with my heart. I wonder how much I will be able to close the distance between my friends and me. I will make the 8,000 km gap disappear one step at a time.