

My name is Békefi Csongor Bernát. I am Hungarian, and I want to share what my exchange year in Japan meant to me, from August 2024 to February 2025. Looking back now, I can see how much that year shaped not only who I am, but what I want to do with my life.

ARRIVAL AND THE KANADA FAMILY

I was placed with a host family in Nagoya. . My host parents welcomed me alongside my three host siblings. From the very first days, I felt like I had gained a second family, not just a host family.

Every evening after a long day, I would sit down with my host parents and talk about absolutely everything: my experiences navigating a new country, Hungarian culture, whatever had happened at school or at kyudo practice. After dinner we often played games together, shogi most of all. Those quiet evenings, more than any single trip or event, are what I remember most fondly. They were when I felt most at home.

SCHOOL AND KYUDO

I attended Aichi Prefectural Nakamura High School which was located a little far from home. In my very first week, I joined the kyudo club, and I still practice whenever I have the time, even now, back in Hungary. Kyudo became the backbone of my routine: club every day after school, and again on Saturdays. Afterward I would spend time with my school friends before heading home for those evening conversations with my host parents.

Sundays were for exploring Nagoya. By the end of my exchange, I think I had visited nearly every museum in the area.

Language came slowly and then all at once. By the end of the year, I could follow most of my classes. I also made friends from all over the world through my exchange, and I still talk to many of them monthly.

I don't regret a single part of choosing Japan, not even the hard days, and there were some. I look at those now as trials I overcame, not setbacks I suffered.

WHAT CAME AFTER

My AFS journey did not begin or end with the exchange itself. After my selection orientation camp, I started volunteering, and I was already helping AFS Hungary before I ever left for Japan . I have held nearly every role available to me: trainer, event organizer, and now, closest to my heart, part of the Budapest chapter's leadership.

My door is always open, to students, volunteers, and host families alike, for problems large or small. Beyond that, I have taken on a hands-on role in preparing others for their own journeys, facilitating and helping organize orientation camps for students arriving in Hungary and for those about to leave on their own exchanges.

Through AFS, I have had the chance to represent Budapest and AFS Hungary at several international gatherings. I attended the first international Chapter Leader Summit in Málaga, Spain, took part in a week-long training program in Türkiye, and joined a weekend training in the Czech Republic.

A BRIDGE BETWEEN TWO COUNTRIES

My exchange also gave me a purpose beyond volunteering. I realized during my year in Japan that this was the kind of work I wanted to build a life around, so I am now studying International Relations, with the goal of working for an NGO or one day serving as a diplomat for Hungary. That same exchange planted in me a desire to be a bridge between Hungary and Japan specifically. I took part in an initiative that collaborated with the Japanese Embassy in Budapest, and for my contribution to that event, I received an invitation from His Excellency the Ambassador to a reception at the embassy.

CLOSING

I could write so much more about my AFS journey, but it would all come back to the same thing: my love for this organization, and my belief in its mission to build a more sustainable, just, and peaceful world.

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