The Development of Kendo in Slovenia

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Slovenia, a small European country with a population of only two million people, is situated between the Alps and the Mediterranean Sea. Strange as it may seem, in a country this small, one can find a couple of dojo where you can practice kendo, and you are most welcome to do so. In this article, I would like to introduce the origins and continued growth of kendo in Slovenia.

Kendo does not have a long tradition in Slovenia, as opposed to other European countries like Italy, France, Belgium, England, Germany and Hungary, and it is not surprising that the kendo community in those countries is far bigger. Martial arts like karate, aikido and judo have a much longer tradition in Slovenia, and are far more popular and commercialised.

Beginning in 1985, there have been several attempts to introduce kendo to Slovenia, but real progress started in 1999 when two kendoka formed their own dojo in two different towns: Iss-Hogai in Velenje, and Shidokai in Kranj. This led to kendo practice starting on a regular basis and the formation of the Kendo Federation of Slovenia (KFSLO) the following year. In the same year, the KFSLO organised the National Championships and several tournaments at Iss-Hogai and Shidokai. There were also many activities that included kendo demonstrations in order to popularise kendo in Slovenia. In April 2001, the European Kendo Championship (EKC) was held in Italy, during which the KFSLO became a member of the European Kendo Federation.

An important milestone for Slovenian kendo was the participation of two Slovenian kendoka at the 1st Kendo Summer Seminar in Copenhagen, Denmark, in August 2002. The seminar was organised by the Danish Kendo Federation, in cooperation with the All Belgium Kendo Federation (ABKF),

Hirakawa-sensei

and was conducted by Hirakawa Nobuo-sensei (Kendo K8-dan, Iaido K7-dan). At that seminar, the two participating KFSLO members asked Hirakawa-sensei and representatives of the ABKF for any kind of support which would help develop kendo in Slovenia. Upon returning home, those two members then organised a seminar at which they presented the valuable knowledge gained at the Danish seminar. Also, there was a discussion on the future course of kendo in Slovenia.

The beginnings of kendo in Slovenia were not easy for those pioneers, but they possessed an incredible zeal to acquire any kind of information to improve their kendo, and popularise it in Slovenia. It took a lot of travelling around Europe, which posed a great financial burden as there was virtually no support from any institution, and the few enthusiasts were left more or less to their own devices.

In December 2002, three members of Slovenian dojo took part in the 11th Winter Seminar and Nakakura Cup, organised by the ABKF, in Brussels. At the seminar, there were around 200 participants from Holland, Sweden, Finland, France, Germany Italy, England, Poland, Turkey, Denmark, Belgium and Slovenia. The seminar was conducted by a 22-strong Japanese delegation led by Hirakawa-sensei. Participation in this important event was another step in the right direction for the growth and improvement of kendo in Slovenia.

In 2003, two Slovenians participated in the Kendo Summer Seminar in Belgium. On the final day of the seminar, both passed the examinations for 1-*kyu* and *shodan*, the first internationally recognised kendo *dan* grade in Slovenia. It was confirmation that we had set upon the right path, following the guidelines laid out by Hirakawa-sensei. The seminar was also an occasion to invite him to visit Slovenia.

It is hard for a *shodan* to run a dojo. Despite this, some people were willing to drive by car for almost two hours five times a week to practise for an hour and a half. They did just that for more than a year to learn kendo and grab any piece of newly gained knowledge brought from abroad. I believe that this kind of dedication and hard training is instrumental in moving people to a higher level.

In August 2003, the KFSLO organised the 1st International Kendo Seminar in Slovenia, which brought together 33 kendoka from Belgium, Croatia, Slovenia and other members of the former republics of Yugoslavia. The KFSLO organised the event in cooperation with the ABKF. In 2010, almost seven years later, the 2nd kendo seminar and the 1st Samurai Cup were held in Slovenia. The seminar attracted more than 100 kendoka

2012 seminar participants

from Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, Hungary, Italy, Israel, Montenegro, Poland, Romania, Russia, Serbia, Switzerland, and Slovenia and it turned out to be a great success. The seminar was conducted in cooperation with the ABKF and was conducted by Hirakawa-sensei, who was accompanied by four high-ranked Japanese sensei and two high-ranked European sensei. It was a four-day seminar held in the Slovenian capital of Ljubljana. We also held a summer seminar in 2011 and 2012 and we are planning to organise another one in 2013. All the aforementioned seminars were attended by more than 100 kendoka and were conducted by Hirakawa-sensei.

At the last seminar held in Ljubljana in the summer of 2012, we were honoured to have been visited by seven high ranked Japanese sensei as well as some high ranked European teachers from Belgium, Italy and France. Kendoka from Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Brazil, Croatia, France, Germany, Israel, Italy, Japan, Switzerland and Slovenia participated in the four-day seminar, and they were also able to grade up to 5-dan.

The seminars are led by Hirakawa-sensei whose instruction is always very interesting because he emphasises the connection between the cuts that we do with a *shinai*, with those of a *katana*. One of the most interesting things was *happō-giri*, which includes eight directions of cutting using *shinai*. For kendoka who do not practice iaido, this teaches the various *hasuji* that are not seen in regular kendo. We also practiced *katate-waza*, which are very hard and complicated at first, but help to develop a flexible wrist for correct *tenouchi* later on when using both hands. The hallmarks of Hirakawa-sensei's teachings are a focus on correct *shisei* (posture) and *seme* during practice. He always teaches us that while practising kendo, one always needs a straight heart and a replete spirit, never looking for a shortcut just to get an *ippon*.

Most of the seminars are concluded with a *shiai*, the Samurai Cup. All the matches are *ippon-shōbu*, which presents the practitioners with the reality of a very narrow margin of error. In 2011, we were proud that the Samurai Cup was won by a Slovenian kendoka, but this year's champion was a Belgian. Slovenian practitioners still often have to travel long distances to practice and take part in competitions abroad, but it is also important to have events like the seminar and Samurai Cup organised in our country, too.

At present, Slovenia has 50 members who have participated at numerous seminars and competitions all around Europe. Currently, there are five clubs in the KFSLO, the latest, the Club of Japanese Swordsmanship in Maribor, joined at the beginning of 2012. Without a permanent high ranked teacher in Slovenia, the members are trying their best to educate themselves abroad, attending seminars and joining *keiko* with the clubs in nearby countries such as Austria, Croatia, Italy, etc. Considering the young age of the KFSLO, Slovenian kendoka have made remarkable progress over the past ten years, which can be seen by a constant advance in *dan* gradings as well as by their achievements in international competitions. Slovenia participated in the EKC in 2004, 2008 and 2010. We have also participated in *shimpan* seminars in Austria and Belgium to gain knowledge and bring it to Slovenia.

At the time I started practising kendo in 2003,

it was in a very small gym in Kranj that only a few people regularly attended. There was little knowledge and no *dan* level practitioners in Slovenia. To practice when you feel that there is not enough structure and security behind your efforts is hard, as it is to build certainty and self-confidence. We are at the point now where four Slovenian practitioners have been awarded 4-dan, and several others have attained other *dan* grades.

In the beginning, we practised the Nippon Kendo Kata a lot, but there was almost no explanation of the psychology and reason behind it. Meeting a real sensei in Brussels for the first time was a blessing and a relief. I have great respect for those people who started studying kendo in Slovenia, but when I met Hirakawa-sensei for the first time, I saw someone with a level high enough to teach the philosophy behind the practice of budo, especially kendo, and the *riai* (principles) of the Nippon Kendo Kata. Listening to and watching an 8-dan explaining and showing you something is very different from reading a book or watching a video about it.

When I started practising kendo at the age of 40, I was desperate to find some peace of mind. However, not knowing and understanding the reason of doing something left me feeling empty and uncertain. I did not want my kendo practice to become merely an aerobic activity or sport. It is not so paradoxical to choose martial arts when trying to find peace of mind. If we take into consideration the "Concept of Kendo" and the "Purpose of Practicing Kendo", we find many answers to our questions: developing mind, body and spirit; correct training; striving for improvement; human courtesy and honour; sincerity; and an on-going pursuit of the cultivation of the self. Furthermore, kendo and its etiquette seemed the right way for me to do this. When I began to figure out the *riai*, it had a profound effect on my understanding of kendo and how I viewed myself and the world around me.

Many people in our culture show great interest in Japan, its culture and its martial arts. My experience is that all events presenting Japanese culture or martial arts in Slovenia are always well attended. Even more interestingly, the young generation is attracted to different Japanese martial arts. They are fascinated by stories of samurai and bushido. There are several books about these topics translated into Slovenian, and Nitobe Inazo's *Bushido* is one that was published in Slovenia last year. It seems that, despite different cultural and religious backgrounds, people from all around the world are drawn to the same universal principles and to the way of the warrior.

I believe that in order to understand how to discipline the human character through the application of the "principles of the *katana*", it is

necessary to study Japanese culture and the way of Japanese warriors of old. Hopefully, there is a very slim chance that a kendoka will be faced with a life threatening situation in which they will need to, or even be able to use a sword, but there are countless situations every day where all of us need to control ourselves. It is important that people who start practising kendo also learn about its origins, and think about the reasons why they do it.

At the last seminar held in Ljubljana, Hirakawa-sensei expressed beautifully the wisdom of Shimada Toranosuke: "If you want to study the sword, you have to study the heart." I strongly believe that the values a person can gain through dedicated kendo practice are as important, or even more important, in today's fast changing world as they were in the past. If we compare the purpose of practising kendo with a contemporary book on neuroscience, we can easily find more similarities than differences when it comes to discipline, developing the mind and moulding the human character. The first one is ancient wisdom, and the second is contemporary science, but both teach the same principles.

This is an important observation necessary to be incorporated into planning future strategies of presenting kendo to the general public in Slovenia. It includes writing articles, filming documentaries, making short videos to post on the internet, and planning demonstrations of kendo in schools. I believe that the young generation today is even more in need of the qualities and values that kendo has to offer.

A goal of the KFSLO is to participate in the EKC and the World Kendo Championship, and also to become a member of the International Kendo Federation. Within the next five years, the KFSLO would like to accomplish the goal of making kendo attractive and available to children in Slovenia. For this to become reality, we need to have a team of teachers who are willing and skilled enough to work with the next generation of practitioners, who will in turn cultivate and practice this important martial art and present it to future generations.

At this point I wish to thank the All Japan Kendo Federation and its representatives, for all the help we have received from them in the past years. We hope that our future efforts will be noticed by the people who have the power to make our path easier to travel.

The author with Hirakawa-sensei