

Nemoto Sensei in Osimo, Italy
May 10-11, 2003

I had been looking very much forward to going to the seminar held by Paolo Corallini Shihan with Nemoto Sensei. The seminar was to be held in Paolo's hometown, the beautiful medieval town of Osimo, close to the seaport city of Ancona. This was to be Nemoto Sensei's second European seminar, the first being held in Slovakia a few months before. I was excited to be a part of what everyone who knows Nemoto Sensei hopes will be an ongoing tradition, of having him visit for seminars here in Europe. Nemoto Sensei started his Aikido training in the Iwama dojo as a fourteen year old, and trained with O-Sensei from this time until the founder's passing. He has since then been loyally following Saito Sensei's teaching, and has kept a regular training schedule in the Iwama dojo up until Sensei's death last year. He now teaches in different locations in the Tomobe area.

I met Nemoto Sensei back in 1984 on my first trip to Iwama. He was always at Saito Sensei's side, both during training as well as when Sensei needed help around the dojo or when he held parties for us newly arrived uchi-deshi. Nemoto Sensei would always take time to come and sit with the uchi-deshi after parties and gatherings. He has always been very good to the uchi-deshi in Iwama. Nemoto Sensei was wonderful to train with, very dynamic and powerful, but he would always take care of his partners in practice. He would know exactly how much you could take, and he would take you right to the edge! Everyone who knows him also knows his wonderful smile and cheery disposition. His smile is one of true spirit, his eyes warm and kind. It was great to meet him again, this time in the beautiful setting of the Osimo seminar.

The trip was also to be my last club trip with the Copenhagen Aikido Club, since I would be starting my own dojo shortly after returning. So there was a bittersweet feeling to the trip as well, for me. But I couldn't have wished for a better way to say goodbye to my colleagues from the club than under these circumstances.

My fellow Aiki-travelers were Rachel Andersen, Søren Andersen, David Gottlieb, Kim S. Hansen, Troels Dam Kristensen and Lars Murholdt. Apart from Lars, who has been doing Aikido for a year and a half, all the others were instructors and boardmembers of the Copenhagen club. Søren and David had been in Iwama, so they had met Nemoto Sensei before, and Lars and David had been to the first camp in Slovakia. The others would be experiencing Nemoto Sensei and his teaching for the first time.

Arriving late Thursday evening, we were picked up by Roberta Monticelli, Paolo's sweet and extremely hard-working assistant, and Francesco, Paolo's son. Both are, by the way, very experienced and gifted Aikidoka who are instructors in the Osimo dojo. Francesco is also becoming more active in his teaching, running classes in a dojo in Naples as well. Stephen Colville, a very dear friend of mine, and representative for Iwama Ryu in Scotland had arrived about the same time at the Ancona airport. This was a nice surprise, I didn't know he would be at the seminar. We were all taken to our hotel in Osimo. After checking in, it was straight to bed for all of us.

Our group at the hotel was comprised of the seven of us from Copenhagen, Stephen, and two South African Aikidoka, Gregory and Christian. Christian is the representative of Iwama Ryu in South Africa. He comes to visit and train with Paolo regularly. He is a very dedicated Aikidoka and fine person, a very worthy representative for Iwama Ryu indeed. All of us were treated as royalty by Paolo and his staff during our entire stay.

Friday morning was our first meeting with Nemoto Sensei, at the breakfast room of the hotel. He had grown a full beard since I had last seen him in Iwama in 2001, and it looked very good on him. He told me that he had now retired from his work to practice Aikido full-time, and could therefore choose to wear a beard if he wanted. He was happy to see the large group from Copenhagen, and I

presented him with a box of Danish chocolates on behalf of the Copenhagen group, apologizing for the extra weight it would make in his baggage for the return flight. This is sort of an inside joke in Aikido circles, because people enjoy bringing gifts to the sensei teaching the seminar, who usually ends up with tons of stuff to lug back home! Sitting together with Nemoto Sensei was Mark von Meerendonk, the representative in Germany. Mark and Nemoto Sensei have a close relationship. Mark has lived together with his wife Ute (also representative in Germany) as uchi-deshi in Iwama for more than a year in 1981. They have been back for other stays since then, and have a close friendship with many of the old dojo sempai from Iwama. Mark and Ute speak Japanese very well, and Mark acted as assistant and translator for most of the seminar.

We in the Danish contingency had Friday off so we could enjoy the sights, sounds, smells and especially tastes of beautiful Osimo! We wandered around the old town, absorbing the atmosphere of ancient Italy, and absorbing some nice Italian food and beverages as well. Paolo was very gracious in taking care of us all, treating us to a delicious lunch in a lovely restaurant in the old center of town. We met later that evening for an, if possible, even better dinner.

Saturday was the first day of practice, in a very nice sports center a little ways outside of Osimo. Seeing Nemoto Sensei teaching class was a wonderful experience. I have trained under him many times during my trips to Iwama, and his teaching was exactly the same as it was there. His technique is clear, dynamic and powerful. It is very reminiscent of Sensei in Sensei's strongest years. Nemoto Sensei's explanations were very to the point, and always delivered in a polite and kind manner. For the record: he uses very polite Japanese when teaching. His technical points are very much the same as Sensei emphasized, nothing extra added. Nemoto Sensei's weapons techniques are very clear and precise. He has travelled extensively with Sensei both as Otomo (assistant) as well as Uke. In this context he had been able to train weapons with Sensei much more than most of the Japanese deshi and Japanese dojo-sempai. It was truly a joy to train under Nemoto Sensei's guidance.

(For the readers who haven't been to Iwama: weapons were taught by Sensei in the mornings, and these classes were basically for uchi-deshi and soto-deshi. Some of the regular Japanese practitioners were also allowed to participate in the morning classes but this was more the exception than the rule. It was also difficult for most people to make it to the early morning classes if they worked normal hours. The only other chance for weapons practice for the regular students who came to the evening classes was on Thursdays when practice was done in the local Iwama Budokan. This class was usually taught by Hitohiro Sensei, and was half an hour of tai jutsu and half an hour of weapons.)

During the camp we had our meals at a small restaurant in the sports complex. The food was delicious, of course! Fresh pasta, and pizzas made with a minimum of toppings and a maximum emphasis on deliciousness. After lunch Mark and Paolo took Nemoto Sensei back for a well-deserved rest before evening keiko.

Evening keiko was just as enjoyable as morning keiko. It was nice seeing Nemoto Sensei paying attention to all the practitioners, making sure that as many people as possible got the techniques down correctly, truly in the spirit of Saito Sensei! Practice was nicely balanced with both weapons training and tai jutsu. One class was devoted to suwari-waza. Nemoto Sensei was very dynamic in his suwari waza, moving beautifully on his knees. We were training on lightweight mats made out of a kind of foam-rubber, with the corners notched like a jig-saw puzzle, and I thought they were actually better to do suwarai waza on than the normal tatami. There were several points that Nemoto Sensei made regarding certain suwari waza techniques that I was particularly grateful for. I have noticed that when I have a question about a certain technique that I aim to ask about at the seminar, it somehow happens that the given technique ends up being taught before I have time to

ask! In Japanese there is a saying: “Isshin Denshin.” This means “one spirit communication.” This seems to happen quite a lot in Aikido, like Ki-musubi.

After evening keiko it was a quick shower and off to the restaurant. As most Aikidoka know, “Keiko no ato no biiru” (the after-practice beer) tastes the best! Italy is known for its delicious wine, but their beer is equally delicious. It was brought out in large pitchers, and we all stood up and gave Nemoto Sensei an official “Kampai!” Food was brought in, the beer flowed and a good time was had by all. Presents were brought up to Nemoto Sensei who graciously received them with his wonderful smile and words of thanks. It was getting late, so rides were arranged for all to get back to Osimo. The more hardy of the Copenhagen group went out for a nightcap, while the senior (read:old) members (me!) rolled into bed.

Sunday morning was two hours of classes, again with a nice mixture of techniques: jo dori and jo nage. Mark had left to get back to Germany so I translated for Nemoto Sensei, together with Carlo, the Italian/Japanese translator. Just as with Saito Sensei, translating for Nemoto Sensei was very easy. His explanations were not complicated, merely logical and to the point. I couldn’t help noticing again that he was using a very polite level of Japanese, even though he was in a position of authority and didn’t necessarily have to go to the trouble.

After keiko, Paolo presented Nemoto Sensei with a special gift: a nice carry-on piece of luggage. This was symbolic in the sense that it was a sign of wishing Nemoto Sensei to come back again. It also had a very practical aspect as well: all the gifts that had been lavished on Nemoto Sensei during the seminar couldn’t fit in the suitcase he had brought with him!

After the seminar, there was just time for a quick bite to eat. We did manage to have a much-deserved glass or two of beer. The weather was very hot and after two hours of keiko, we did need to re-hydrate!

Paolo drove Carlo, Nemoto Sensei and I out to the Ancona airport for Nemoto Sensei’s return flight. Nemoto Sensei checked his bags in with no problems and we were all set. Next to the check-in counter there was a large metal stand which is used to check the size of your handluggage. I attempted to give this to him, saying “Chiisa na omiyagi dake desu keredomo...” “This is just a small souvenir for you...!” He got the joke, and I almost got a right hook on the chin, delivered with his trademark smile!

We sat and had a cup of delicious Italian coffee, talking pleasantly about future plans, and then it was time for boarding. We watched as Nemoto Sensei checked through security and waited until we were sure he was safely on board.

One of the things I was hoping to do when meeting Nemoto Sensei at the seminar was to try to set up a possibility for staying as uchi-deshi or soto-deshi to practice under his guidance. I knew that he had his own classes, and thought that it might be possible to arrange something. Again, Isshin Denshin had struck! Mark and Paolo had already talked to him about just this. Plans have not been finalized yet, but there are several locations which are being looked into right now by Nemoto Sensei’s own students that would make it possible to set up a training/living situation in the Iwama, Tomobe or Mito area in Ibaraki prefecture. As soon as these plans are settled there will be information coming out. Recommendations will be sent to Nemoto Sensei through the Iwama Ryu Europe representatives for people wishing to go to study under his tutelage. I recommend everyone to experience the dedicated and dynamic Aikido and the warm spirit of Hiroki Nemoto Sensei.

I would like to conclude by thanking Paolo for his wonderful hospitality and generosity, for taking such good care of us during our stay. And to Roberta, Francesco and the many more who are part of the team in Iwama Ryu Italy who always are there to help us in so many ways. Domo Arigato Gozaimashita.

Yours in Aiki,

Ethan Monnot Weisgard