

## **Hitch-hiking to Sensei**

*By Andrzej Bazytko*

When I had decided to enrol on Aikido but hadn't yet done so, I came across Christian Tissier's book "Aikido Fundamental". This is a training manual, like all of sensei Tissier's books, intended for people who are already practising the discipline rather than for those who have not yet made such an important step and have not started training.

However, it disturbed my previous composure. It was the beginning of my fascination in this extraordinary martial art. The book explains the basic concepts of Aikido and the author is presented together with a short biography, several excellent photographs of Japanese masters, and many photographs presenting Aikido techniques. There was very little text but a lot of pictures. I didn't realise what I was actually looking at. I wasn't aware of what an outstanding figure Morihei Ueshiba was, of how brilliant his works were. I didn't know that the Japanese masters who were referred to - Kisshomaru Ueshiba and Seigo Yamaguchi - were amongst the most important continuators of those works. I didn't suspect that the author of the book is one of their most talented pupils, one of the most popular teachers of Aikido in Europe. This knowledge was to come later, when there were enough emotions.

One of the most important decisions connected with practising any of the martial arts is to find a good teacher. I decided that I would one day find my way to sensei Tissier, and as a good start I made a huge blow to my wallet by buying the book for 30 dollars, which was a huge sum for me in those days.



***Picture 1 – Aikido seminar in Warsaw, 22.12.1990: Sensei Christian Tissier, Ola Sowińska (from left)***

In those days there was only one club in Warsaw. The time of expansion was yet to come. We all trained together. Many people who I met then at the trainings still practice Aikido today. Romek Hoffmann, Jurek Pomianowski, Boguś Rumas, Tomek Sowiński, and Sławek Szewczyk run their own clubs in Warsaw, Tomek Krzyżanowski - in Olsztyn. Paweł Dymus runs lessons in the same club as Jurek. You can also meet there Piotrek Kamiński. Szczepan Jańczuk trains in Canada.

From time to time I meet other acquaintances from those years. We drew our knowledge from wherever we could. We went to all the possible seminars which were within our geographical and financial reach. It turned out that, the way to sensei Tissier is shorter than I thought, because Jurek Pomianowski made contact with him and trips to Vincennes near Paris, where *Cercle Christian Tissier* is based became possible.

The first to go at the beginning of 1988 were Romek Hoffmann and Witek Kirmiel from Zielona Góra. Others followed in their steps, and almost everyone in the club from the group of people who were most devoted to the trainings ended up going there sooner or later. I am convinced that it was vital experience for everyone who

had the opportunity to train in Vincennes. However, some decided to stay there for longer.



***Picture 2 - Aikido seminar In Warsaw, 22.12.1990: Sensei Christian Tissier, Jurek Pomianowski, Andrzej Bazylko***

In September 1990 I decided to confront the book with reality. I persuaded Tomek Sowiński to make the trip, Tomek persuaded his future wife Ola (perhaps he didn't have to persuade her much). Ewa Kordowska and Kuba Pajnowski joined us on the spur of the moment. Tomek and Ola went by bus, and the three of us hitch-hiked.

Hitch-hiking brought us many new experiences. We limited ourselves to sightseeing the foreign countries. We crossed our own country by train. In Zgorzelec at the border crossing we went up to the first car which had no one in it but the driver. The driver wasn't too keen to take three people with a large amount of baggage. However, when we found out that he was going as far as Strasbourg, in other words, through the whole of Germany, our negotiation skills dramatically improved and we travelled the rest of the journey together. It was so fast that we began to suspect that our benefactor was a motoring specialist. When we met the team transporting the rally car it turned out that we were travelling with no other than the famous rally driver Błażej Krupa, who was travelling to a rally near Strasbourg.

We spent the night in a youth hostel in Strasbourg, but it reminded us of a hotel rather than what masqueraded under the same name in Poland. For the sake of

fairness, we spent almost the whole of the next day trying to avoid another night in the same place. Finally we succeeded, although we didn't get far, not reaching Paris until the next day.

It was my first trip to Vincennes. More trips followed. The bus period began, which meant devoting no more than 24 hours to reach France and another 24 hours to get home. However, once when there weren't any tickets for the return journey I had to travel 36 hours, changing buses in Amsterdam. Then I saw a little of northern France.

For the first trips we still had to arrange visas, then later it was only necessary to spend more and more money to realize our passion. Up to a certain point I was aware of how many trips I had taken and how much money I had spent, but then fortunately I lost track.

The bus period smoothly made way for the car period. It was cheaper, faster, and it was possible to stretch your legs whenever you wanted. There were also moments of decadence, when time was short and it was necessary to fly. However, the best remembered trip is the first one.



***Picture 3 - Christian Tissier's club in Vincennes, 15.04.1997: Sensei Christian Tissier (in the reception), Agnieszka Kraciuk and Andrzej Bazylko (on the bench) with Pascal Norbelly, sensei Christian Tissier and Patrick Benezzi (in the background of the picture)***

Sensei Tissier received us very warmly. We were allowed to sleep in the dojo for free, which even today is the rule during a visit to Vincennes. For a certain time we also stayed in the second premises of the club, which were empty, but not yet sold,

where we were the only tenants. We didn't have electricity and the roof was leaking here and there, but this meant nothing compared to our temporary reign over such a big space. If we wanted to rent such premises we would have to live in a completely different financial reality. There was also the additional advantage that the cleaner woke us up at 6.00. Anyone who has spent at least a few nights on the mat at *Cercle Tissier* knows how unpleasant that moment is.

Since I spent a few months there, I developed the technique of unconsciously moving around the mat in the sleeping bag, a few steps in one direction and a few in the other, to perfection.

After all, living in the club required activeness, since almost without a break there was training of various martial arts going on and there was nowhere to rest. Anyway, we didn't intend to rest. Whenever there was no Aikido training, we chose the tourist option. When you are somewhere for the first time you don't know if you will visit again. So we visited whatever we could. Our rest from training was sightseeing and rest from sightseeing was training. During the next visits we were able to maintain greater calm.

Paris is fortunately a city in which sightseeing cannot be exhausted. There will always be something left to see, and some places you can visit an unlimited number of times. However, above all we came to train Aikido. We were confronted with a completely different reality. Immediately we understood that we had to work on it for many years. That perspective, as well as the level of technique and the methods of teaching presented by sensei Tissier, led Tomek and I to make our choice of teacher even then. We wanted to be part of the group representing such a high level and that is what happened.

At the beginning it was hard. Now it is our world, but fortunately it is still very far to its borders.

Soon it turned out that more Polish accents appeared in this world. Paweł Bernaś from Cracow (Kraków), inspired by sensei Tissier's first visit in Poland (which took place in December 1990), decided to join us and so in September 1991 we were able to train together as a pair at Fontenay Street in Vincennes. Paweł was so keen to improve his abilities in France that he spent there over three years with breaks in between. For half a year a second Paweł from Cracow also trained there - Paweł Olesiak.

The Warsaw-Cracow quartet ambitiously decided to transfer onto home soil the knowledge disseminated by sensei Tissier. Even today our efforts do not cease, however we now have support from our pupils, many of whom have accompanied us on seminar trips. Some of them have been going there for years and it sometimes happens that they stay there longer.

Nowadays the presence of Aikido students from Poland is treated as something completely normal. In this regard only Aikido students from Germany can match

us. This is quite an achievement bearing in mind the fact that in *Cercle Tissier* often even regular trainings group together an international crowd. Sometimes we met at the seminars Aikido students from other Polish clubs. Recently Adam Manikowski and Wojciech Drag from Poznań have begun to appear there regularly. Perhaps they will join us permanently.



***Picture 4 - Christian Tissier's club in Vincennes, 11.09.1992: Bruno González, Philippe Orban, Tomek and Ola Sowiński, Pascal Guillemain, Andrzej Bazylko***

Paweł Bernaś and Paweł Olesiak originate from the Cracow Aikido Association, in which today they are the main instructors. Tomek Sowiński and I decided to establish the Private Aikido Club "BAST" in 1991, in order to concentrate completely on what we had learnt from sensei Tissier. In 1995 our pupil Jacek Czerniachowicz opened the Private Aikido Club "JAF" in Kielce, whilst in 1996 each of us decided to go his own way, resulting in the creation of two clubs in the place of PKA "BAST" - Private Aikido Club "SOTO" and Private Aikido Club - Andrzej Bazylko.

During the next years work took shape in these four clubs connected directly with the teachings of sensei Tissier. His teachings had and still have an influence also on many people not connected with the clubs which I mentioned. Many Polish Aikido students took part in seminars run by this outstanding teacher, not only in Poland, but also abroad. The same concerns seminars run by his pupils. The teachings of a teacher of such a class have, after all, a very wide reach and often even people



training in other schools had come across less or more directly the teachings of sensei Tissier.



***Picture 5 - Christian Tissier's Club in Vincennes, 15.04.1997: Sensei Christian Tissier and Bruno González***

As I have already mentioned above, we first had the opportunity to host sensei Tissier in December 1990. The seminars took place in Warsaw just before Christmas. About 80 people took part in it. Later we could only dream of such comfortable conditions; over 200 people took part in the next seminar. Perhaps it was because it didn't take part until June 1997 in Warsaw. Fortunately we didn't have to wait so long for the next visits. Sensei Tissier visited Cracow twice – in November 2001 (as part of Aikido's 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary in Poland) and in November 2002, and next he came to Warsaw in April 2003. We have also hosted sensei Tissier's best pupils many times. As early as 1992 we hosted Philippe Orban in Warsaw. In the following years we also invited Pascal Durchon and Philippe Gouttard. Pascal Norbelly visited Cracow. They all belong to the generation of pupils that has been connected with sensei Tissier for many years.

This year we invited to Poznań a representative of the younger generation of his pupils - Pascal Guillemain. Philippe Orban cooperates directly with Tomek and both Pawels, whilst Pascal Durchon – with me. Each of them has now visited our country a dozen or more times. We have been friends with them for years. They helped us take our first steps in sensei Tissier's group, they welcomed us into their homes and clubs, helped us to understand the reality there.

Among sensei Tissier's pupils it is precisely them who we owe the most. The situation of people who want to become acquainted with Christian Tissier's school is completely different from a dozen or more years ago. There are clubs in Poland which have represented the school for many years, and new ones are also being created. Sensei Tissier visits our country regularly, as well as his pupils. They conduct 6 to 8 seminars per year (7 in the season 2002/2003). Sensei Tissier conducts seminars in Dresden, Berlin and in Leipzig, where Philippe Orban has his own club. This is really close to our country.



*Picture 6 - Christian Tissier's club in Vincennes, September 1994. Sensei Christian Tissier and Andrzej Bazytko*

During my first visit to France I didn't realise what an effective teacher sensei Tissier is, how many pupils he has at a very high level, how much his return from Japan in 1976 changed first French and then European Aikido. However, I already understood that by coming here I would see Aikido at its very best. I would not only train with sensei Tissier, but also take part in seminars conducted by the most



outstanding teachers. Already during the first visit, Tomek and I found ourselves at the seminar of the then Waka Sensei, and currently Doshu – Moriteru Ueshiba.

The next visit was the next seminar with a teacher of the highest class - sensei Seichiro Endo. In the following years I also had the pleasure to train under the guidance of sensei Masatoshi Yasuno. I only mention those teachers who I met in connection with my trips to sensei Tissier. All of them, including sensei Tissier, have one common feature – their teacher was Seigo Yamaguchi.

In May 1994 I visited Paris for the seminar of sensei Yamaguchi and I was enchanted. I understood then why what I was studying was called a martial art. Sensei Yamaguchi was in all certainty an artist. During the seminar I didn't manage to discern even one technique. The movements flowed smoothly from one to the other regardless of who attacked the master, a beginner or advanced pupil, regardless of what kind of attack it was, slow or fast, or what school they trained in, regardless of everything. Every movement was accepted. Sensei Yamaguchi could cope excellently in every situation. It was the harmony of movement. I was most impressed and a year later I once again travelled to Paris, hoping that from that moment on I would be able to train under the watchful eye of the master as often as possible. Unfortunately it was to be the last time, as sensei Yamaguchi died in January 1996. Now it is only possible to watch his pupils, but his pupils are outstanding. Till today I have before my eyes the images of those two seminars. I was extremely lucky to be able to participate in them. It convinced me that Aikido can achieve the level of art and become extraordinarily effective. Even if one does not manage to achieve such a level, one knows that it exists. That is enough motivation to train Aikido.

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