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• **America**    **Shozo Kato**

## **The Tracks of 20 years of New York's Shidogakuin**

Shozo Kato: Born 1955 in Hiroshima Prefecture. After graduating from a photography school in Tokyo, worked as an assistant to photographers such as Tenmei Kano and Minsei Tominaga. Moved to the United States in 1982 to study at the Pratt Institute of Art. He and Tsuyoshi Inoshita established the Doshikan Kendo Club (later named the Shidogakuin) in 1984. Since then, he has established *dojo* in New Jersey, Washington D.C., Connecticut, and Florida. He currently operates his own photography studio, Sho Kato Studio.

Next year, the New York *dojo* will celebrate the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of its establishment. Somehow, 20 years have gone by since I started teaching *kendo* in America. My original purpose in going to America was to become an established photographer; I was particularly enamored with the rich individualism and invigorating atmosphere of New York to the point that I was willing to leave Japan and the familiar and comforting environment it offered. Although I continued to practice *kendo* even after arriving in America, it was very much limited to a pastime; the idea that I might someday teach *kendo* never crossed my mind.

A housewarming party cum photography exhibit, to which I invited my art school friends in the loft to which I had moved soon after arriving in America, served as the trigger mechanism for my becoming a *kendo* teacher. I do not remember how the subject of *kendo* came up, but in any event, I found myself being asked to demonstrate some *iai* techniques I had been explaining. Not having a sword handy, I grabbed a near by mop stick and gave a demonstration.

A Spaniard, who was studying in America, challenged me saying, "I used to teach fencing. How about we pit Western fencing against Japanese fencing?" Back in those days, I was still brash and cocky enough to take on such challenges. With our friends watching, he and I faced off. When I managed to capture the equivalent to his *kote*, he admitted his defeat in a sportsmanlike manner, and then asked me if I would teach him *iai*. I casually agreed, and thus began my teaching, which started with twice weekly practices sessions with only two to three pupils per session. In those days, practice sessions played second fiddle to my main activity, photography, and were a far cry from real teaching.

The following year I met someone who very much changed my life. It was Doctor Tsuyoshi Inoshita, the current chairperson of the Greater Northeastern U.S. Kendo Federation. I am quite sure that I would never have established the *dojo* had I not met Doctor Inoshita; nor would I be where I am today as a martial arts practitioner. It may be at least partially because Doctor Inoshita and I call home the same region in Japan, but in any event, we hit it off very well immediately after we met. It was not long after we first met that we decided to establish the *dojo*. We both abhorred the type of teaching wherein the teacher's attitude is that of deigning to teach the pupils; rather, we wanted an environment where "the teachers do not become arrogant but rather where both those who teach and those who are taught can learn

and grow.” It was based on that spirit that the Doshikan Kendo Club (its name was changed to Shidogakuin in 1989) was established on August 1, 1984. In its early days, it may have been a *dojo* in one sense of term, but it was really more like just a group of people with a common interest getting together.

### **The NYPD Responds to a Call Only to Find “Oh, It’s *Kendo*”**

In the beginning, the number of members was small, and finances were tight, so tight that I often had to dip into my own pocket to make the rent payment for the space we used for our practice sessions. Also, I remember when I somehow managed to trudge my way to the *dojo* in a blizzard only to find that no one else had made the effort.

Furthermore, back in those days, there was still considerable prejudice against the martial arts. This made it difficult to find a location to use for practice sessions. In most cases we were rejected as soon as they heard the words “martial arts.” Although the noise level is not such a problem with *iai*, it did present many problems for *kendo*, there were numerous incidents revolving around the trials and tribulations of finding practice space and managing to stay there.

In those early days, one of the pupils was an opera singer, and a soprano at that. Since she was an opera singer, she had phenomenal lung capacity and her shouts were superb to say the least. During one practice session, we heard a police car’s siren approach, and then a booming voice over a megaphone shouted, “Are you okay?” Wondering what was going on, we interrupted our practice and went to look out the window without bothering to remove our *men*, only to find ourselves facing the New York Police Department; their reaction, upon realizing what we were doing was, “Oh, it’s *Kendo*.”

We learned that some neighbors, upon hearing our soprano’s magnificent vocalizations coupled with the sounds of clashing bamboo *shinai* and the vocalizations of the men who were also practicing, deduced that a woman was being raped and was screaming for help, and called the police. In the end, everyone, including the police, had a good laugh.

Then there was the time when we were renting space in a dance studio and were told in the midst of the practice session by our downstairs piano store neighbors to “Get down here right now!” When we went, we were confronted with the scene of a number of white ceiling tiles on top of their pianos. They angrily said, “We’ve had people doing the tango and flamenco but there’s never been any trouble like this. What the heck are you guys doing up there? What are you going to do about this?” Fortunately, the matter was settled without having to get involved in litigation, but I must admit that I did break out in cold sweat under my practice *gi*.

There were numerous trials and tribulations but perhaps it was because of that ability of youth to look unswervingly toward the future that the days we spent were very fulfilling.

Then when less than two years had passed since the club had been established, Doctor Inoshita moved to Ohio. I had grown so dependent on him that when he left, I found myself

bereft of motivation. What gave me the impetus to keep trying was a letter from Doctor Inoshita in which he wrote, "I have found that my kendo experience has served me well when I have faced difficulties as an oncologist. I hope that you will persevere." That made realize that the problems I was facing probably did not amount to much, and prodded me to renew my commitment.

### **Participating at the Kyoto-Taikai in an Effort to Advance Further**

Teaching Japanese traditional martial arts and the spirit of the martial arts to those who are unfamiliar with Japanese culture is no easy task, but when I see how much the pupils are growing and advancing in spite of these difficulties, I feel that it has been worth the effort. In addition, these pupils serve to stimulate me in the positive sense of the term. The realization that I get from them that I cannot become complacent invigorates me. As I teach, I am taught and cannot help but be awed by the realization of how much more I must learn, and frustrated by the constraints I face in trying to improve myself.

For those of us who teach in America, the paucity of opportunities for us to practice amongst ourselves is a source of considerable frustration and despair. When I left Japan to pursue my photography, I never realized that I would be facing this sort of situation. I envy my colleague *kendo* practitioners in Japan for the wonderful environment they have. When I practice, I always try to keep in mind and spirit the kind words of the late *Hanshi 9<sup>th</sup> dan* Yasuhi Nakanishi. He said, "No matter who your opponent, always make sure that you give your best to your *shodachi*: always strive for kendo by which being prepared for *dehana*: always strive for *kendo* in which you are never retreating." In addition, I go to Japan once a year to participate in the Kyoto-Taikai and to avail myself of the wonderful opportunity of practicing with the great sensei in Japan. Every year, as the day for my departure for this pilgrimage to Japan draws closer, I feel myself becoming taut with welcomed anticipation.

*Kendo* in America is still very much in the growth stage. In some ways, the effort to nurture America *kenshi* may not be realistic. We need to re-examine what we are trying to accomplish through teaching kendo in America.

When I want to accomplish is not merely to make kendo known in America, but rather to teach proper *kendo*. Somehow, what started out as a pastime has become a vacation. I dream of teaching so as to be able to proudly introduce to the world American *kenshi* who practice the true *kendo* of Japan's tradition, and to be able to participate in creating and maintaining an environment conducive to the nurturing of such *kenshi*. What I hold to be most important is to be able to better myself together with my pupils.

As we approach the end of our first score of years, I want to face the next score of years, the next chapter, with renewed commitment.