

Featured Dojo-cho, February 2002



Jirka Friedl

Aiki Dojo Mainz, Mainz, Germany
Division 1

In 1975, my Judo instructor handed out a book about martial arts, called "Das Budo ABC". Well, half of it was addresses of Judo-clubs, the rules for tournaments and information about the hierarchical structure of the german Judo organisation and its laws to obey. Half of the rest was again Judo, detailed description of techniques with small sketches to them. The other quarter was divided into small sections for Ju-Jutsu, Karate-do, Taekwon-do, Kyu-do and Aikido. That was my first contact.

At that time, Aikido was definitely the most exotic of those arts to us, and nobody had ever heard about it. As I was very enthusiastic about the martial arts, I tried to start practising some of the exercises described in the book, but the Aikido section didn't open up for me at all. It consisted of a very emotional story of heart and peace, very low quality pictures of a guy in a skirt grabbing or lifting another guy, and some text, which was definitely not understandable. All in all, nothing but bizarre. It appeared to be a riddle, and maybe that was the attraction that drew me back years later. Today, I hold the rank of third Dan, and I'm still puzzling.

After I had finished school I was drafted to the german military in

1984. This environment made me discover my pacifistic side pretty fast. Though I was a reasonably good sniper, learning how to aim for a running person made my guts revolt. I resigned from the military, going through a trial, and started civil service instead. In the meantime, Aikido became more available in Germany.

I finally started in 1989 with my good friend Christian Mann, who is now teaching in Cologne. My first teacher was Friedel Schober in the police sports club of Mainz. Soon I started to regularly visit Mark & Ute van Meerendonk, the Iwama-Style pioneers in Germany, and became Uchi Deshi for them a couple of times.

In 1993 I saw Patricia Hendricks Sensei for the first time. It was at a seminar she taught in Germany, and it was like a revelation to me. It was the first time I felt something beyond muscular strength and mechanical leverage to the techniques. I was amazed by the graceful power of that petite lady. At her second seminar, I simply walked up to her and asked for permission to become her personal student.

Then, August 1994, after I had quit my job and had left my apartment to a friend, I arrived at her dojo in San Leandro, planning to stay for three months. It was a tough call, since I had never left my hometown for more than two weeks. After a journey around the planet, including a short visit in Iwama, I happened to return to Germany more than a year later.

Being back in my hometown, I took over the abandoned Aikido-section of the police sports club. The size of the group rapidly shrunk from 6 to 2, and then gradually built up to 30 in 1998. In 1999 we moved to an old building on a former US-Forces airfield, and the most dedicated of my students transformed the house into a full-fledged dojo. The official opening celebration was in April 1999.

Today, the Aiki Dojo Mainz has almost 100 members, one third of them kids and teens, training on more than 1300 sqf of mat space. We offer 6 classes per week for adults and 4 for the youngsters. Besides restrooms, showers and dressing rooms, there is a spacious kitchen and living area for getting together and browsing through our library. We even provide a special room for guest teachers and accommodation for uchi deshi. Additionally, I teach regular classes in defense and enforcement for staff exposed to physical violence in educational institutions.

My most Memorable Aikido Experience

It's hard to trace down my most memorable experience to one single incident. In fact, my whole time in San Leandro was definitely most memorable, magical. It was very hard at first to try to let go of the old patterns of the mind, and I felt a lot of resistance from inside of me. But the power of transformation was not to be withstood. There was simply too much evidence of spiritual forces at work that I finally had to surrender and turn from the analytical, almost sarcastic engineer, to an open, esoteric believer of the universal laws, gaining tremendous freedom and confidence. I never thought that these things would reveal so clearly.

Here is simple example: Beginning of 1998, I had just started a new software company, and I was drowning in my workload. My dreams of a 'real' dojo were put on hold. At the end of the year, a friend of mine took me to that building on the old army airfield. I thought: "Wow, that place would be ideal, too bad I can't go for it at this time", so I didn't tell anybody what I'd seen. That same night, my student Jan came back from San Leandro, having been Uchi Deshi there for two months. He had a gift from Sensei for me, and she had told him to give it to me with the words: "for the new dojo".