

# “The Only Way is to Walk”

PRAGUE – KYIV

By

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I saw this quote posted on a sign not too long ago and it struck me as very relevant to the path of Budo karate and even more particularly our past trip to Eastern Europe. We flew out of DC on an overnight flight to Frankfurt and then on to Prague where Kancho had a commitment to meet with the adventurous Mount Saint Mary's exchange students who were in school there. Once we settled in the hotel it became clear that our short visit would be one "long walk". Prague is as many of you know a pedestrian city. We were struck right away as to how most people walked and as a result were relatively fit compared to our own city dwellers in the USA. We weaved our way through the cobble streets, unchanged for centuries. We spent some time in a square near the famed Charles Bridge "arguing" about Yansu (entertaining the passersby.) The highlight was of course eating dinner with Father Jim, the resident faculty from the university, and the 18 Mounties.

The dinner itself was wonderful but the company even more delightful. These young people were passionate travelers, intellectually curious, and service driven. Many of them hoped to continue their studies in a way that involved more travel particularly to less developed nations. I was struck by the

diversity of academic disciplines present; math, biology, religion, English and drama majors filled their ranks. Besides Czech history they were all working to get the basics of the Czech language down (a daunting task for anyone). . Father Jim is a great example of the best of Mount teaching and leadership. I came away energized and deeply proud of my alma mater for sponsoring such a great opportunity.

An early morning flight brought us to Kyiv and the usual wonderful welcome from our Shihan and Sempai. The city welcomed us with some brisk fall air and we headed into Kyiv central with Sempai Anton, nervously awaiting his nidan test, but competently weaving through Kyiv traffic. . It was nice to spend that day settling in, walking and talking.

We spent the next morning traveling to our Shihandai's home outside of Kyiv. We walked, took the subway and drove. We were very impressed by the lengths to which Shihandai Natalie travels every day in order to service the 5 dojo in Kyiv. It makes the typical DC commute look like nothing. Their modest home was welcoming and filled with "Phoenix". It was hard to look on any wall, shelf or table and not see something related to their commitment to the Way of the Warrior. I will add I was very jealous of the vegetable garden and awesome hanging bag they have in their yard. After a quick cup of tea we returned to ready for the evening Yudansha training.

About 15 of us gathered in the Kyiv Technical school for focused training and kumite. We were thrilled to be joined by Sensei Ryan who after a full day of meetings donned the dogi for a good sweat. Kancho focused on walking the floor, dachi, and proper posture and of course kata. We ended the long session with the start of Sempai Anton's kumite. Spirited and focused he persevered despite some solid contact from the head of the Margonisk dojo, Branch Chief Sensei Pavel. Sensei had traveled 8 hours by train with about 20 of his students to attend the Saturday training. He understands that "to get there you must walk". After a social at the local fast food restaurant we slept well in preparation the next day's gashuku.

The Gashuku brought together around 75 of the kohei and Yudansha in Ukraine. This was a great turnout given the difficulty of transportation in Kyiv. We once again spent most of the time walking the floor. "Good karate", Kancho reminded us, "begins and ends walking the floor." We also worked some basic ground fighting and then organized several rings of Oyama. Several testing kohei met the Phoenix and we culminated in Sempai Anton's bloody but determined kumite for his nidan trial. Kata was interspersed as well. Sempai Anton's tamashiwari was exciting and clearly inspired by his visit to Camp Phoenix USA this last summer. It was also announced that he would serve as Ukraine's Dai Sempai. A very well deserved title.

A long day of sweat ended with a question answer session between Kancho and the youngest Kohei where they asked him everything from how old he was to what his favorite kata and color were.



Our social was at a local pizza place for selected Yudansha including Sempai Roman, Tanya and Yuri, Sensei Pavel and our Shihandai. We ended the evening with a cold walk on Krechatik street in the downtown area and a long talk with our Shihandai. Although we wished the visit could be longer we agreed it felt like a very “complete” trip. It ended with our new Dai Sempai proving his worth by picking us up at 2:30 am to drive us to the airport! He clearly had not slept and was a little on the sore side but we greatly appreciated the service. He walked the walked! Big Osu! to all in Ukraine!

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Shihan Melanson is the Senior Vice Chair of the Association and one of the most experienced karateka in the Phoenix Karate-do Association Kyokushinkai International. She has traveled and instructed around the world and serves as the Chief Instructor of her Bethesda, Maryland USA dojo. When competing she was a prominent champion in kumite, kata and tameshiwari. A member of the Shihankai, she holds the Rokudan. Fluent in German, she holds a Master’s degree in history.