

Once Upon a Time at Berlin Zen Center . . .

Muchak JDPSN (Namhee Chon)

“It would be great if we could have a Zen center near our home and do that thing we did the last week!” Roland said.

I replied, “Yes indeed! Maybe we can do it at our home.”

This was our conversation on the way home after one week of Kyol Che in Falenica, Poland. It was the very first time we participated in a Zen retreat at all, on top of which, it was the intensive week of training. Actually it was a week full of suffering and pain. We had come unknowingly to the intensive week in the middle of Kyol Che, during which extra bowing and night practice were scheduled. Everyone had only about four or five hours of sleep a day. But as soon as we left the entrance gate of the Warsaw Zen Center after the retreat, we clearly saw that something very important had come into our life.

10]

After coming home, we took all the furniture out of the larger room of our small two-room, 65-square-meter apartment. In the middle of the room we put a small table, and on top of it a thumb-size Buddha statue. This was now our dharma room. But we had no other people to meditate with! Therefore, as a next step, we visited countless bookstores, organic food stores and Japanese Zen dojos in Berlin and put our advertisements everywhere we could find space. And we waited, waited and waited for people to join our meditation. Many weeks and even months passed, and still, nobody showed up. It was just the two of us in the dharma room for a very long time, until on one Sunday, a couple appeared wearing the black robes of the Japanese Soto school. That was 25 years ago.

I still remember vividly our first YMJJ in Berlin. Since Roland and I were both quite poor students, we could not afford to buy mats from a shop. I had to sew the covers and fill them with cotton we bought from a wholesale market. They were finished just shortly before the YMJJ started. Many young people came to the retreat. They were strongly inspired by the teacher at that time, Do Am Sunim JDPS from Poland, whose eyes sparkled during the interviews and dharma talks. He lit a fire for practice in peoples' hearts. After that, besides regular morning and

evening practice, people often came to the Zen Center for night practice and 1,000 bows. The fact that the Zen center was also our home was forgotten completely. It was good like this.

Soon after our first YMJJ, we got a phone call from Zen Master Wu Bong, who at that time was called Dharma Master Boep Mu, and he said, “Zen Master Seung Sahn changed his schedule in Europe. Instead of Paris he wants to go to Berlin. Will you be able to prepare a retreat with him and find accommodations?”

Of course we wanted to! But it was only three weeks away! (This was in the spring of 1991.) Moreover, he was supposed to be accompanied by a group of monks and Zen masters, including Mu Sang Sunim, Su Bong Sunim, Do Am Sunim and Boep Mu JDPSN (later known as Zen Master Wu Bong). The biggest problem was to find hotel rooms for all of them. There was a major trade fair in Berlin at the same time, and so no hotel rooms were available in the whole city. After unsuccessful attempts to



Photo: Berlin Zen Center Archives

find rooms, we had to ask the Vietnamese Buddhist community in Berlin for help. They loaned us some old, worn mattresses and blankets, so we could accommodate all our honorable guests in our single dharma room, where they had to lie down to sleep packed tightly together.

Dae Soen Sa Nim said simply, “Stay at the Zen center, no problem!”

So he slept in the other small room, in Roland's and my bed.

"Since the beginning of our school, we have never spent nights so close together like this," said our guests, laughing and taking the situation with humor.

But there was an even more serious problem: the bathroom. As was customary at that time in cheap student apartments in Berlin, we had no shower! Therefore we had to take all our guests to the nearby public bath, which was located in a big public swimming pool building. Of course, we had no car, so we had to walk about 15 minutes each way. I learned that Americans usually take their cars even for distances walkable in 10 minutes. This was somehow a big surprise for me.

The retreat was a great success. We were all thrilled and enthusiastic about our teachers and the large turnout. We promised Dae Soen Sa Nim that we will get a good hotel room for him if he came to visit again. We could happily keep our promise the following year. With an increasing number of members and support from Korea and Mu Shim Sunim (now Zen Master Dae Jin), who sent us a golden Buddha statue and a big bell, our Berlin Zen Center slowly got into good shape.

From the very beginning, the Zen center was too small to host retreats. For many years we had to rent places for our YMJJ. Thus a weekend retreat for us meant moving

the whole Zen center back and forth: the Buddha, bell, mats and pots all needed to be moved to the rented places and afterward back to the Zen center. I guess this was one of the reasons why our dream of a bigger Zen center became strong and urgent. We wanted to build a residential Zen center with a bigger dharma room and many more bedrooms so we could live and practice together.

Where there are visions, there are ways to fulfill them. In the mid-1990s, the Zen center received a generous donation from a wonderful bodhisattva, a friend of one of our members. With this money, we could now rent a 400-square-meter former factory floor. We renovated it according to the needs of the Zen center. This happened during the years Roland and I were living in Korea. This very large project was accomplished by Jo Potter JDPSN, Arne Schaefer JDPSN and many other members in Germany and all of Europe with much dedication and love. Thanks to their work, members and visitors of Berlin Zen Center still receive the immeasurable benefit of having a beautiful space of our own to do retreats, and to live and practice together. The building project of Berlin Zen Center is yet another story in itself, and I hope we will soon have an opportunity to tell about it.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank all those who have helped to establish Berlin Zen Center. Thank you all! ♦

[11

Winter Kyol Che - Europe 2016 January 2nd - March 18th at Wu Bong Sa, Warsaw, Poland



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Picture courtesy of Barry Briggs JDPSN