

# Half a Month as an Uchi-Deshi at the Chiba-Dōjō



*by Bello Nicolo' Masanobu*

## The meaning of “uchi-deshi”

Before going deeply into the subject, I would like to give an overview about what it means being an uchi-deshi in a traditional koryū dōjō. As the term is pretty much self-explanatory, an uchi-deshi (内弟子) is an “internal student”. Which basically means, a student of a certain Ryūha (of any kind) who lives in the Dōjō. Everything is pretty clear so far, but being such a kind of student, involves a variety of aspects that are hidden behind the actual word “living”, and I would like to explain, through my personal experience, what means and feels like to be an uchi-deshi.

## The life of an uchi-deshi

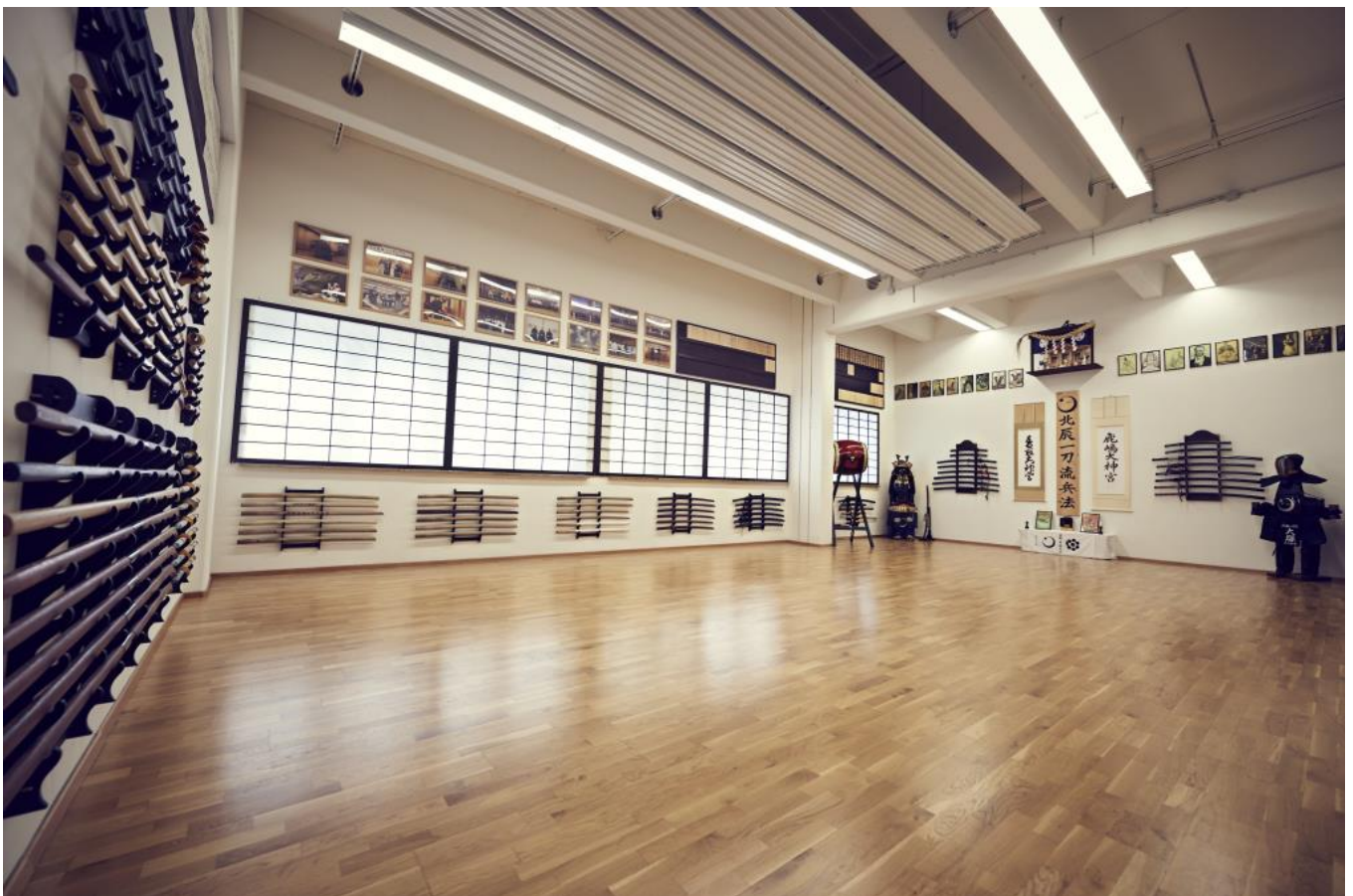
As I explained above, the uchi-deshi is a student who lives and trains in the dōjō. There can be just one or many, but as the times have changed, the cases where a student can have such an experience are pretty rare. The student who lives in the dōjō becomes its caretaker and its responsible person. He or she has to take this duty seriously.

Which means, every day with no exceptions the pupil has to clean and tidy up the dōjō (bathroom, dressing room, entrance and of course the main training hall), assure that everything works and if needed repair and fix the things that have to be fixed. On the other hand, of course, an uchi-deshi has to train hard during and after the official keiko, despite him being physically and mentally exhausted.

## About my experience at the Chiba-Dojo

The Chiba-Dōjō is the Honbu (headquarters) of the Ryūha I'm enrolled in, the Hokushin Ittō-Ryū Hyōhō and it's nowadays located in Munich, Germany. It's a place full of life, and everything there is meticulously lead by the tradition. Once entered and the big wooden style door with the two Gesseimon (the crescent shaped kamon of the Chiba-family) closes the outside world ceases to exist and you get automatically the feeling of being transported back in time directly to the Edo-period.

The teaching at the Chiba-Dōjō is held directly by the 7th generation Sōke, Ōtsuka Ryūnosuke Masatomo, whose life is completely dedicated to the ryūha and its preservation and evolution. I am very lucky to get to know him in a very close position as uchi-deshi directly at his Dōjō. Because of all the time we spent together training, we became very close, not only as teacher and student, but also as friends. While many Koryū teacher keep a very hard distance to their students and the outside world, somehow trying to become an unapproachable master, Ryūnosuke-Sōke is the complete opposite. He is open in any sense. Be it for discussions about his Ryūha, Koryū in general, technical aspects, or drinking and joking together with the students after Keiko has finished.



The training would start at around 11:00 and go through all day with minimum breaks for drinking during the hot summer days, till it ended around 22:00. So the training lasted up to 11 hours each day.

During so many hours of training, we went through a huge variety of waza and kata of the HIRH curriculum and also talked about historical and philosophical matters of the school and the times when the school began its ascent, becoming the top of the San-Dai-Ryūha of the Edo Period. I was amazed by the vast and detailed culture of Ryūnosuke-Sōke, beside his evident tremendous skills in kata and shiai, he is a very educated person and an avid reader, who puts the culture and knowledge on a higher level of comprehension and understanding.

The corrections were frequent, the inputs many, maybe too many for a human brain to assimilate. But that's the way the HIRH students are taught. Aim for the impossible, and make it possible. Of course, this kind of training, requires a huge amount of will power and perseverance.

The frustration, which can superficially be recognized as an unease and bad feeling, it's the spark that makes you go forward in your way and place the bar always higher and higher.

The Hokushin Ittō-Ryū Hyōhō is a fighting Ryūha, which means it puts equal attention on katas on Gekiken (full contact training which can be practiced in bōgu and, or for the higher ranking students, without protections but still full contact). All the kata themselves are not made as a "ballet" as can be seen in many other Ryūha, in fact, the HIRH ones look pretty clear and straight forward.

Nevertheless the Ittō-Ryū's essence is to strike down an enemy with one single deadly blow. This is always behind what looks effortless to the superficial eye: a world of details hidden in simplicity. Truly a scientific approach on Kenjutsu.

Returning to my daily life at the Chiba-Dōjō, my alarm was set at 08:00 am, after getting ready for the day and eventually some shopping for the daily needs, I dressed up and started warming myself up with suburi, stretching and going again through the teachings I received the day before. From around 11:00, after opening the doors of the two kamidana and cleaning the dōjō floor, my private training with Ōtsuka Ryūnosuke-sōke would start, going through different kinds of keiko, from kata-geiko to full contact shiai-geiko with bokuto. Through so many hours of training and shiai, I received many corrections and hints, which kept me awake, most likely every night, elaborating the teachings received during the day. My one week long private seminar was directly followed by the one week Summer-Gasshuku which was also hold there.

After as good as every training there is a party at the Chiba-Dōjō, with a large amounts of drinks and delicious food, or we go out for dinner with the other students. This is the opportunity for the students to create strong bonds, healthy relationships and increase the Dōjō social life, just as it was in the past. I had so much fun during the parties, and every moment was extremely precious.





## **After one week of private seminar the Gasshuku started**

One week's passed, and the Gasshuku was about to begin. The Gasshuku is always a fantastic occasion to see old friends and meet new people. It's like a family reunion when you don't see your distant relatives for quite a long time and you all get together for spending time. Before the Gasshuku started, me and another student once more cleaned the Dōjō, in order that everything would shine for the beginning of the special event. We stayed up till 02:00 am in the night to make everything right, but it was satisfying to see the good job we have done.

The first day started, in a very strong way with huge amount of suburi, long session of katageiko and of course unbelievable hard gekiken-geiko which puts every person to the personal limits, motivating them to become stronger and stronger. The second and third day, since the weather would get worse later in the week, we took advantage of the fantastic sunshine and went for an outside training at a nearby park. It was simply amazing! Marching in lines in the streets with our naginata, yari, shinai and bōgu. This is what I talk about when I say that HIRH is in my opinion the most genuine and best preserved Ryūha nowadays. Everything feels and looks exactly like one can read in the diaries of bushi from the Edo-period.



After arriving on the “battle-field”, we started the training with HIRH uchikomi-geiko, which was amazingly fun and hard at the same time. Kenjutsu, Naginatajutsu, Jūjutsu, Atemi and strong waza were performed on difficult terrain. After that came the shiai-geiko and in the end, dulcis in fundo, we had groups battle situations.

You can just imagine how it feels like, twenty people screaming and charging in groups with their swords and long weapons against each other! This exhausting training serves not only to develop a great stamina and strong technique, but also to refine the strategy, circling the enemy, protecting the flanks of the own formation and leading skills of the higher ranking students and the ability to follow orders by your superiors.



## **Gasshuku's grand finale**

The seminar was running smoothly and the schedule was proceeding without any problem. This Year was kind of special, since the descendent of 1st sōke Chiba Sadakichi Masamichi, and niece of the 5th sōke Chiba Hiroshi, Inaoka Mai came to Munich to visit the Chiba-Dōjō. It was a great honour for all of us to know her and let her witness to our keiko. She was positively surprised by the strength and the intensity of the keiko, and everything went well.

On Saturday, there was the Kirigami shins scheduled for three students of the Ryūha and I was appointed by Ryūnosuke Sōke to supervise their preparation after the regular Gasshuku training on Friday evening.

The day was longer than normal, we went through various details of the waza and kata, and everybody really gave their best. They all passed the shinsa the next day. After the kirigami have been presented to the applicants, the ceremony wasn't over yet. Sōke, in his straight and majestic posture, summoned me, and without any clue of what was going on, I got up from my seiza and sat in front of him. Then he took a menjō from behind him and started reading: "Inkajō, Bello Nicolo Masanobu dono, migi no mono Hatsu-Mokuroku wo inka suru...".

I was awarded the Hatsu Mokuroku scroll. I would lie if I wouldn't say it was one of the best and happiest days of my life, and I was so proud and honored that all my effort bear fruit, that even tears rolled down my face.



After a short break for congratulations and greetings, the hard training restarted as always. In the evening, we had a great party and everybody celebrated the great day passed. Huge amounts of sake were poured in company of a lot of delicious sushi.

On the last day, we performed an Enbu for Inaoka Mai and after preparing all the necessary stuff, we had some fun testing our swords in a suemonogiri session. Suemonogiri is the cutting of unsecured Makiwara, unlike in Tameshigiri where the Makiwara is secured and thus way easier to cut. Ryūnosuke- Sōke himself used his favourite 2.7shaku Yamato no Kami Yasusada (Daito) and his Heki Dewa no Kami Minamoto no Mitsuhiro (Shoto) and demonstrated what those swords are capable if used correctly, cutting a thick target consisting of 3 Makiwara rolled in each other like it was butter. In HIRH, the usage of small and quick cuts is focused on, so it is practiced to cut that way and not only with big and wide cuts which is quite easy. What a better way to end such a great Gasshuku?



## A strong Gasshuku starts and ends in the same strong way

These were the last words sōke said before stepping outside the dōjō floor after the last 500 haya-suburi to end the gasshuku in a proper and exhausting way. In these words I find the essence of being a HIRH kenshi. We live our lives in the strongest way possible, always aiming for the top. That's why our motto is "Tenka Ichi No Ken!", the strongest sword under heaven. Many schools have lost their fighting spirit, hiding behind the "tradition folklore" which is not a real significance for a Bujutsu Ryūha, since in the past fighting was an everyday task for every kenshi, inside the Dōjō and outside of it. The mentality of the bushi was "living to die". Hokushin Ittō Ryū Hyōhō is preserving this spirit unchanged for almost 200 years, and will keep doing so transmitting those teachings to the next generations.

I would like to thank you all for reading this article and I hope you liked it. A special thank goes to Ōtsuka Ryūnosuke-sōke and to all the people who supported me, trained with me and believed in me during these hard weeks and still supporting me in my everyday life. If you would like to share this article, feel free to copy or repost it.

Yours,

Bello Nicolo Masanobu

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