

# Taijiquan & Qigong Federation for Europe

8<sup>th</sup> Congress/Forum

Ruse, Bulgaria

July 2009

## The Event

Directly after leaving Tai Chi Caledonia on Thursday evening I left early Friday morning to travel to Ruse, Bulgaria for the 8<sup>th</sup> Taijiquan & Qigong Federation for Europe's (TCFE) Congress Forum. Hosted by local Master, Maria Nedelcheva I set off with a slight air of caution as the economic climate (among other factors) meant that the numbers were lower than usual for such an event.

## The Journey

On arriving at Bucharest Airport I was greeted by a local driver who informed me that an Irish woman was coming to meet me but, because of a car accident on the motorway, she would take another 30-40 minutes and did I want to wait. Having no recollection of any Irish women in my past I was curious as to why she was travelling to meet me.

Eventually the riddle was solved when an American woman, living in Romania, enrolled for the conference and was instructed to look for me at the airport to share the long ride to Ruse. Eliot was joined by Connie from Holland who lived locally with her Bulgarian husband, and then we were finally on our merry way.

## Where to Eat

On nearing our destination, the TCFE President, Nils Klug, called to invite me to join him with Severino Maistrello an Italian teacher whom I'd met the previous year in Venice. Nils has two current passions, Italian men (he assures me he just likes their company) and good quality food. Now these are not qualities one would normally associate with tall, thin Germany vegetarian men, or maybe my perceptions are entirely wrong! Anyway, my immediate priority was to find out

where to stay, dump my baggage and eat.

## 1<sup>st</sup> Night in Ruse

Once we were dropped in the town centre I met Maria, her students along with Cornelia Gruber (our Treasurer) and her students from Switzerland. After much discussing, to-ing and fro-ing, we eventually ended up at the Happy Bar which served an interesting array of local delicacies at more than affordable prices. Sometime later I was escorted to a city centre apartment which I was to share with Marianne Plouvier and Antonie Ly from Paris, who I had spend some time with only a few weeks ago when teaching, as their guest, at Paris Qigong 2009. As they were evidently asleep I crept quietly to bed. Sleep however, was somewhat evasive with the twin perils of noisy locals and no air-con. The next







morning I awoke early to be greeted by a similarly knackered Marianne and Antoine who agreed we had to move out. I ended up in the comfortable hotel along with Nils and Cornelia with air-con. Internet connection, etc. – all the essentials for the modern traveller!

#### The Welcome Meeting

Saturday morning saw us gathering at the town hall where the Deputy Mayor welcomed us by quoting the works of Lao Tze in his speech. The local council had done much to support the event, including providing the apartment I had just vacated. However they did offer considerable support in other areas, more of which we would discover later. Nils, as President did the thank yous and welcomed the delegates to the Conference.

#### The Press Conference

Once the formalities were over, we as

the EC, attended a Press Conference, which yielded some curious questions. A young woman from a local TV company looked decidedly bored by the whole proceedings, asking questions whilst deeply slumped across her chair. I had the clear sense that she was less than inspired to get out of bed early at the weekend, to get a minute or so worth of material on this Chinese exercise thing. Eventually she asked how the economic situation could be helped by practising tai chi. I replied that the ‘credit crunch’ provided a real opportunity for many people to reconsider the life qualities that were import to them and that perhaps they would find something other than material wealth to fulfil their spiritual needs. Through the practice of tai chi and qigong people can develop tools to connect deeper to themselves and thereby help to lead a healthier, more balanced life.

A press reporter also suggested that, because European’s are not Chinese they may be susceptible to physical and mental problems by practicing Chinese arts. I assured her that, as we are all people, we all breathe, have blood, oxygen and nutrients running through the same bodies therefore there was no danger whatsoever.

#### Meeting the Teachers

Having done our political duties we walked the short distance to the training hall, via the open, attractive village squares. Here we were introduced to the 40 or so participants and then began the work of teaching. The teachers were: Cornelia Gruber (Switzerland), Nils Klug (Germany) Antonie Ly, Anya Meot and Marianne Plouvier (France), Maria Nedlecheva (Bulgaria), Severino Maistrello (Italy) and me from Bonnie Scotland, UK. As numbers were low we had around



12 – 16 participants at each session, which was fine. However after I realised that I was scheduled o teach simple taiji qigong exercises over the course of the whole week, after the first session was over I started teaching the more involved Dayan Qigong, Wild Goose.

#### Maria’s Sword Workshop

Looking for some images I dropped in on Maria’s sword workshop where she seemed to be covering all the crucial points required for using the instrument. Her attention to detail regarding grip, focus and intent was thorough and the eager students were soaking it up.

#### Bulgarian Dancing

Maria Nedlecheva did an excellent job of promoting the event locally as well as creating a continually stimulating programme both in terms of work and social activities. Aside from the variety of quality workshops, every evening we

were treated to yet another gathering of local, national and cultural events from a local folk night where excellent musicians played electric violin and Bulgarian bagpipes for traditional music with a modern twist. Throwing caution to the wind, despite being the only make, I joined the ladies in a traditional Bulgarian dancing! – Amazing how the local wines can loosen your inhibitions!

#### Local Wines

The next evening we visited a winery where we were introduced to the highly efficient processing plant, in a very old building, on top of a very high hill, overlooking Ruse. The visit was interesting, the food was excellent and more good spirits flowed between participants. Nils and I spent a wonderful evening in the company of our new Bulgarian friends, one of whom, a man of considerable strength, regaled us with a very sensitive

rendition of a local folk song.

#### The Mountains

Early next morning (well around 9ish) we set off by bus to visit Ivanovo Rocks Country Park which featured some striking views over the valley from an easily accessible, yet no less impressive, mountain range. The rocks were inspiring as we sat or stood beneath the vast blue sky for some quiet meditation. Well that was the intention but despite being sensitive taiji practitioners it took some time for the group to finally find some quiet. Once still, the feel of the rocks, plants and fresh air helped to connect and ground us.

#### The Monastery

One way home we stopped off to visit a monastery built out of caves, hewn out of the mountains. Using simple, practical resources the ancients had found a cool, quiet place for contemplation a short





distance out of normal society and the summer heats.

That evening local students and their families had prepared us a lovely buffet of delicacies they had personally prepared and the children displayed their considerable wushu skills to the delight of both their proud parents and foreign visitors.

Aside from a little push hands here and there, I had too many duties to allow me to attend the workshops of other teachers, although I did dip in an out of a few to take pictures. In my own workshops I noticed that a few of the French students were picking it up well and when I discovered they would stay with my sessions all week I invited them to participate in the demonstrations on the last night. Whilst the performance helped to focus them I hadn't realised how big it would be.

### **The Performances**

At the end of the final day we all gathered in the town square in front of the steps of City Hall. The square was set out with 400-500 chairs, professional stage and lighting setup. The evening

began with a wonderful performance of traditional Bulgarian singers, followed by some boisterously energetic dancing.

Following the TCFE meeting Maria was staging a Chinese cultural event, also in Ruse and introduced the theme with a number of displays of taijiquan and wushu by her students and some of her visiting guests. The performances were spirited, energetic and athletic and caused the audience to get up from their seats and rush the stage!

Once the wushu was over Severino Maistrello demonstrated some of the lesser-seen Fu Style Taijiquan and Bagua Sword Form. Anya Meot's Tung Style tradition was ably represented by her three young students who performed solo and partner routines. These were the same group (Emmanuel & friends) who would later join me for the Dayan Qigong. Marianne Plouvier and Antonie Ly performed aspects of Yang Style Taijiquan together and Cornelia Gruber and her Swiss group did both fan and solo forms beautifully both in dress and ability. Nils Klug used me to demonstrate William CC Chen's approach to taiji boxing and I emerged in good enough shape to join my new

French friends for our Dayan Qigong routine. Before doing so I took the opportunity to thank the assembled crowd for allowing us this unique opportunity to perform for such a large and appreciate crowd in their town square.

### **Unwarranted Concerns**

There was a point early in the year when there were grave concerns regarding the potential success or otherwise of the 8<sup>th</sup> TCFE Congress/Forum. Numbers were lower than previous gatherings but they more than compensated by creating a well-organised, balanced programme, both in terms of work and cultural activities. Because of their hard work they succeeded in creating an event that allowed participants to not only share skills in an open, encouraging environment, but they also all had a wonderful time. I'm sure many friendships and working relationships were forged in Bulgaria and the intentions and hopes of the TCFE were well and truly met by Maria Nedlecheva, her team, and the good people of Ruse, Bulgaria.

Ronnie Robinson  
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