

Tai Chi Caledonia, The Beginning

WITH BOB LOWEY AND LUIGI ZANINI
INTERVIEWED BY MARK LANGWEILER

Mark Langweiler (ML): Let's start by giving me some of your personal history and how you got involved with tai chi Caledonia.

Luigi Zanini (LZ): I started studying Chinese martial arts in the 70s in Italy for many reasons. But the point was that I had problems with my back when I was a youngster and I didn't do any sport, I couldn't because I was exonerated – I had this problem of scoliosis. So I had a corset for two years, I couldn't run, I couldn't do anything, I was short of breath and everything. One day I met a guy, he was of the same age as me and he said: "Oh, you have to do kung fu". I said: "Listen, anything, but not that." He said: "No, no, you have to come." He picks me up and brings me to the gym, I start practising and fell in love with it.

ML: Was it Chinese Martial Arts?

LZ: It was Chinese Martial Arts taught by a Korean teacher who was coming down to Italy via the United States as he was married to an American doctor. He was a Korean guy who was practising a mixed style – from China came some schools to Korea at that time. And there was a typical tendency in the fifties and sixties, to combine the systems together, to pack them – everything you got from China, you packed it into one container, and so you practised one system that was composed of different systems. The few information you had. It was not like you had one style. And by the way, at every stage in this transfer you have additions, things are lost, you had changes. So, in this system we had Praying Mantis,

Shaolin, Haka Chuan, we had Bagua and some other stuff. We this curious stuff, walking in circles, changing techniques. I practiced twelve years with this guy, my teacher. It was very interesting. We went through Italy, we

did seminars, published articles for many different reviews. We were an interesting couple. I was the intellectual guy, he was the physical guy. I wrote, took pictures for him. He was like a monkey. He had real talent.

At one point, I started to read. One book in particular made me change my mind, the 'Tao of Tai Chi Chuan by Jung Song Hua. This changed my life because I started to read about how you can develop a different kind of power from tai chi. The logic behind that was fascinating. This guy was a mathematician. He explained in a rational way how this could happen. I said, "I want to know that." And Bagua was one of the internal arts. In the end, I started to look for that. So, in the end I left my teacher. I had to 'kill the Buddha!' Starting from that point, well, one of my talents are languages. I went to one of my friends who told me "every year there is a meeting in France of people practicing tai chi. I can recommend you to go there." He did and I applied. They invited me and I started to go. I was teaching, in 1990.

After that, I went there for five years. I met Ronnie Robinson, Dan Docherty, a lot of other guys, Nigel Sutton. I met a lot of interesting people, from Germany, from Belgium. It was a kind of place cross influences. The point was there where no loyalties or, this is good other things were not. You could teach what you wanted in the morning, in the afternoon we would push hands. In push hands they took care that no one was blasted or had problems or felt an inappropriate way of being pushed. I remember Wan Yin Yin, teaching in Taiwan, professor teaching French in the university. He is a very charismatic person, very high level.

The point is that he took care that no one felt better. Of course, you could feel the different level. You had a chance to work with people with more knowledge. They had no problem sharing.



We felt secure, a safe zone. This was the key issue for Caledonia. Ronnie Robinson, Bob Lowey, came the first time in 1993 or 1994. They came down, one evening, after dinner, they started talking. I was there too. They said, we have to organise something like this. It was Bob who said it first. I said yes, but how? And will be successful? Are we going to be helped by the Federation. The main points were, in France or a European country, usually you had Chinese martial arts, I had the truth and everyone else were charlatans. In this perspective, we had judo people, we had karate people, kung fu was some kind of wishy washy style. It was the time of Bruce Lee too, see we had the beginnings.

ML: The inspiration.

LZ: The point was about getting over the boundaries we had, the limits we had in terms of talking together, working together in a safe zone. Geniere allowed cross experience, working two persons in a friendly was. This was key because otherwise you wouldn't talk but just smash someone, kick people. This was interesting. The quality of the people, the level of the people doing light stuff, remember, qigong wasn't there. We didn't have the knowledge of the energy. I don't mean that you have to go out and 'kill people', but you can't pretend to be doing martial

arts if you're just breathing or mixing it with yoga or some stuff like that. At that time, we had people coming with real stuff. Sometimes they came because they had knee problems or hip problems and they started tai chi because they found it more respectful of the body.

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LZ: Yes, exactly. The point was about getting over the boundaries we had, the limits we had in terms of talking together, working together in a safe zone. This was the point. Geniere, France allowed cross experience, working two persons in a friendly was. This was key because otherwise you wouldn't talk but just smash someone, kick people. This was interesting. The quality of the people at that time, most of them were coming from karate, judo. The level of the people doing light stuff, remember, qigong wasn't there. We didn't have the knowledge of the energy. I don't mean that you have to go out and 'kill people', but you can't pretend to be doing martial arts if you're just breathing or mixing it with dancing or yoga or some stuff like that. At that time, we had people coming with real stuff. Sometimes they came because they had knee problems or hip problems and they started tai chi because they found it more respectful of the body. But you see that the martial aspect was there too. Very hands-on, good stuff. We could play around with it without killing one another. We went together, we would work during the day and go out together in the evening, eating, drinking laughing. It became a trademark of Geniere. This was the beginning. Ronnie (Robinson) and Bob (Lowey) wanted to do that.

The first time we were going to do that was in 1996. I was invited with another Italian to come over in 1995. At the time, it was quite exotic to come over. We went to a place where there was a Royal Airforce Chalet, in the middle of nothing, where the pilots during the second World War would come down. It was in the Highlands, beautiful but nothing there, just elk, deer, clouds, nothing. We got there through Gordon Faulkner.

He arranged for us to go. We arrived in a cue of cars. We opened the gate, car went through and we closed the gate behind us and stayed for one week.

ML: And that was the very first Tai Chi Caledonia?

LZ: yes, absolutely, in 1996.

ML: And you've been coming since?

LZ: Yes, but Ronnie had a rule that teachers couldn't come every year. They would come 2 years and then have a year off. I have always respected that rule, though I have lost a couple of opportunities due to travel or family. But even in those years when not teaching Ronnie and Bob and I would always stay in contact. Ronnie would call me in Italy. He wanted to create something that was shared. He felt that good ideas could come from anywhere. My position was a bit of an outsider but I was also an insider because I knew everyone. And I would do whatever was needed. If he needed the toilet washed, I'd wash the toilet, I'd go to TESCO. I was really involved with everything. This was a beautiful experience beyond the martial arts, just to inter-connect.

ML: So, this was the beginnings of the community?

LZ: Yes, perfect, that's the word I was looking for. The feeling about being part of something. You know, Maslow's theory, the parameter of needs, belonging is one of the highest realisations. This is one of the things that happened here. Being able to work together, talk together, find solutions together. Managing situations sometimes with people having crisis. This was one of the main things. I was able to add to that with my bagua, tai chi, as a player, an observer.

ML: How do you think it has changed over the last twenty-some years.

LZ: The world has changed. The people have changed. When I came in 1996 there were no cell phones. Communication was limited. It was about creating the community. And in Scotland simplicity was evident. It is said that in Italy, if you have two people talking you can have three opinions. In Scotland, people listen and look at you, they try to understand. They don't argue

immediately. This was a huge difference. That's why in the UK you have one federation. In Italy, everyone has their own federation. Today things are changing. People are coming from all over. They are opening up. We are easy, comfortable. Travel in 1996 was harder. People come here and are comfortable, in 1996, you had to bring everything with you.

We were like survivors, we came together. Today is different. Everybody comes with their phone. The great thing that Ronnie made was three things at the same time. First he created the ambience. He did this by pure instinct. He wanted to create a community around himself. He liked being part of that. The second was that he wanted to increase the skill level. The third was to give the people the ability to express themselves to people who didn't have that opportunity. I'm one of those people. He gave me the self-confidence to do, to go. He gave me this confidence. He said go, do it! He created a safe place to do it. And gave trust. I can only say that Ronnie has been accompanying me all the time. I miss him. Every year he was trying new things, change the place, the format.



ML: Constant growth.

LZ: Yes. One last thing. If you look here, the average is about 60.

ML: I think you're right about that.

LZ: But we also have children, young couples. We've had marriages between people who met here. It isn't only about people coming to pay and take classes. It's the atmosphere. We have people in their 80s and 90s. They come because they feel safe. You don't find these situations so easily. This is what Ronnie created. Bob Lowey (BL) walked in at this point.

ML: First, tell me some of your martial arts background.

BL: I started with judo when I was eleven years old, moved on to karate when I was fourteen. Then I moved into Chinese martial arts when I was 16-17. I stayed with the Chinese martial arts, I was made an instructor in 1979. In 1980 I was working abroad, I was working with a guy who was teaching tae kwon do. I was teaching him kung fu and tai chi and he was teaching me tae kwon do. I came back to Scotland in 1982 and learned more about tai chi from another teacher. From there I opened up my Seven Star Tai Chi school in 1985. Became internationally known in 1991-92 because I was working abroad.

LZ: I was study martial arts myself. I learned wing chun, krav maga, boxing. Something concrete. We have to combine the two, otherwise you're either a mystic or a bouncer!

ML: You got involved with Ronnie.

BL: I'll tell you how I got involved with Ronnie. I started doing workshops for my own stuff around Scotland. And then I started inviting teachers to come and teach at my workshops. By 1990-1991, there were lots of changes in Great Britain. The Tai Chi Union was started. They had meetings in London to discuss how to bring all of the schools together. We decided to form an executive committee. The main people were Nigel Sutton and Dan Doherty. We brought in Linda Chase Broda and Richard Farmer and a lot of other guys. The beginning of the Tai Chi Union. We started to look for other workshops in Europe. This was in 1991. Then I came across this guy (pointing to Luigi Zanini). He was studying bagua. The person who started Geniere was Serge Ryan. They had a committee working toward getting tai chi and related arts recognised in France. To become a certified teacher in France you had to go before karate board. They knew nothing about tai chi. The Tai Chi Union was spreading from the UK into Europe at that time. Over time, European organisations were trying to get tai chi recognised without going to the karate board. Serge and I were talking, we were looking toward promoting and spreading tai chi and related arts. We were going to bring all of the countries together to become a tai chi federation. The first meeting was in Italy. We went and all of the teachers that we knew were there came back. Tai chi teacher started to float around Europe. I came back, and Ronnie and I had the same teacher. We became the best of friends. I thought we could do something similar to what had been going on in Europe. I had experience running workshops





and lots of contacts in Europe, Ronnie had a lot of friends here. So, we decided to do the first Tai Chi Caledonia. All the teachers came to Scotland. I thought we had 30 participants and ten teachers. But when I saw the video I realised that there were 83 people following me. We were on the sea front.

Avimore was too cold. The weather kept changing. The video shows Ronnie starting qigong in the sunny, by the time he finished it was snowing. From there we to Castle Tower. The military had stayed there but it was for us. Ronnie found Stirling University. Everyone staid in the flats. The next year Ronnie found the chalets. We thought we could turn it into a village. It was more expensive, scary money. Cost us our mortgages. We thought it was a gamble...let's do it! That would be in 1999. Ronnie started to take the lead in this. I was handling the entertainment, making sure everybody was comfortable. Ronnie was management, handling resources. He lots of ideas. He was involved with the Tai Chi Union and saw that he was going to make a huge difference from where we started. My personal life was getting really busy. I couldn't dedicate the time to do this. He was bringing in his student to organise. I looked at this and thought he could go on alone here. He had the vision and capability. The place took off under Ronnie's guidance. When Ronnie passed away Aileen and Al took over and it's gone up a level again. It was the birth of an idea that Ronnie took over and guided it to where it is now. ML: I know that you have been away from it for a while. What kind of changes do you see? BL: Huge, much more professional. It's absolutely

incredible. When you see the people it incredible. People have been coming for years. Looking at it now, it is fantastic. People don't come here as strangers. They're strangers for the first couple of hours, after that, they're family. That's part and parcel of what Ronnie created. To make everyone feel at home. That's the history of the start of Tai Chi Caledonia.



ML: Thank you.

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