

MATSUYAMA OUTLOUD, November 2023

—Voices of the WGO? Staff and Members of the Volunteer Guide Seminar— Autumn Battles and Pilgrimages

In the middle of last month, a Greek marathon runner arrived in Tokushima to embark on the Shikoku Henro, a 1,400 km pilgrimage stopping at 88 temples spread across the island.

Theo is raising donations for a Greek NPO, 'Desmos', for the victims of the terrible wildfires and floods in Western Greece.

Last year, he completed the Spanish Camino de Santiago pilgrimage for another charity.

However, here in Japan, a language barrier blocked his way, and he received zero responses from Japanese hotels he emailed willing to put him up during his long walk. His Hungarian secretary stationed in Tanzania had almost given up on booking the 49 accommodations he'd require during his pilgrimage until I offered my assistance. It is difficult to contact small family-run guesthouses online. After all, this is Shikoku! Not that he would have to face many problems along the trail alone. Once he takes a single step as a pilgrim, people will treat him with respect. They will give him any assistance he may need, wish him a safe journey and tell him he is always welcome to return.

Despite having had stitches in his right hand the day before leaving Greece, he began his trek to Ryozen-ji Temple, the first stop in the 88 temple pilgrimage, on October 12.

A kind hotel owner instructed him in the correct procedure to pray at the temples he'd visit along the way. By the second day, photos posted on Instagram revealed that Theo was now a true O-Henro san, with all the pilgrim's sacred items: Suge-gasa, a sedge hat to protect him against the sun and rain and a Kongo-zue, a wooden walking staff, with the inscription "同行二人" dogyo-ninin. This, a reminder that master Kukai would always be by his side during the long and difficult pilgrimage. At least spiritually.

In the past, if a pilgrim died on the trail, his hat would be placed over his remains to serve as a coffin, and his staff became a grave marker at side of the road. I look forward to meeting him at Ishite-ji along the way of this 50-day adventure. He is Theo Sgouras, of Athens.

(Kazuyo Kajiwara)

October 7, at the Matsuyama Autumn Festival, two teams carrying "mikoshi", portable Shinto shrines challenge each other to a battle. Members of these teams risk their lives to compete, rushing at each other while carrying massively heavy mikoshi on their shoulders.

I was there before dawn, a spectator among the clamor in Dogo. The teams carrying seven heavily decorated, sleek black mikoshi gathered in the square, shouting high-spirited abuse at one other. They are young. Even before the fight, the young mikoshi bearers started fighting among themselves and their leader had to stop them.

I spotted a group from Freiburg, Matsuyama's sister city, in the crowd, so I told them. "Today is the best day to visit Matsuyama." Police officers repeatedly warned us to stay back.

One of the portable shrines displayed a portrait of a man, and I wondered if he had been trampled to death in the last festival. Suddenly, I felt frightened. This was a dangerous ritual.

A local diety dwells in a shrine. Mikoshi, which house the spirit of the shrine, are paraded through the town. In Matsuyama, mikoshi load-bearers enhance the spiritual power of the diety by crashing

the structures together at the risk of their lives. In doing so they offer us divine virtue.

After the opening ceremony, the first two mikoshi teams faced each other. Each leader stood on a mikoshi and waited for the best moment for his team to charge ahead. When they slapped at the roofs, the excitement of the audience rose to a climax. 800 kilograms of mikoshi crashed into each other. Hard. Everyone screamed.

The emcee grandmaster of the event, a man with a hoarse voice, admonished the dominant team with a microphone, "Don't push. Withdraw immediately. The opposing team is getting hurt!"

Still, they jostled back and forth. He urged the other team, "Hey, hold up your mikoshi! Your men are getting pushed under!" In the next moment, I was pushed away.

Three stretchers passed in front of me one after another. Injured men.

On the same day, at another venue, a mikoshi bearer cracked his skull. He was in the hospital unconscious and in serious condition. The victim's father in tears faced an interviewer. "I can't believe my son was involved. It shouldn't have happened, for he was helping in a Shinto ritual." He desperately wished for more safety precautions in the future.

This year, as a first measure, doctors in happi coats were deployed inside the battle circle to respond quickly to mishaps. Find the injured and get them out of danger. This has been and will be a crucial concern.

To strike a balance between preserving tradition and ensuring safety for the participants. Still, local people are very proud of this tradition because of the extreme excitement that this festival creates.

(Miwa N.)