

“On the Founding of the IFF Archive of the Feldenkrais Method”

Interview with **Cliff Smyth** by **Richard Ehrman**

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In late August after the Seattle FGNA conference, the IFF Archive Working group went to Portland to continue its work. One evening we took a break to record some history of the Archive itself. George Krutz and I prompted Cliff Smyth to relate the story of how the International Feldenkrais Federation ‘Archive of the Feldenkrais Method’ began. The references I’d heard Cliff make to this story seemed to have the makings of a good tale and I wanted him to tell it to promote the work of the archive. The story serves as an example of how volunteers act to support the Method through our community organizations.

R: Cliff Smyth is going to tell us the story of the beginnings of the IFF Archive. First, what led you to go on this mission?

C: A variety of unpublished materials had been in the Feldenkrais Institute in Tel Aviv for some time. Moshe’s nephew Michel Silice Feldenkrais was having some problems with his health and so we talked about the IFF taking over responsibility for preserving and publishing these materials. For two months in 2001, we negotiated via phone and fax and came up a contract to create the Archive. Then the question was – how to get it to Portland to be stored and worked on?

R: How did you decide the materials should leave Tel Aviv?

C: Well I think we were worried about what would happen to the materials in Tel Aviv – with the weather and other considerations. Michel Silice Feldenkrais trusted the IFF and felt like we would do a good job looking after them. He sent me a fax after we signed saying, “Now this is signed and we should let the community know.” And I faxed back and said, “I think this is a great thing for the community.” So we decided to go ahead – we signed the contract but we still didn’t really have a plan for getting the materials. But it was slow to get off the ground because we were kind of nervous about shipping these unique materials. They needed to be documented before they were shipped. At that time there was a lot going on in the IFF, like the competency project and the Academy idea, and there was a whole lot of new ideas being laid down.

R: So with all these other things you were doing, how’d you come to the decision to go to Israel?

C: In May 2002 we had the IFF Assembly in Norway, a long way from anywhere and Michel was worried about his health and was in constant contact through the Assembly via Daniel Clenin’s cell phone and somewhere in there the idea came up for me to go Israel.

R: You hadn’t planned to go to Israel?

C: I hadn’t planned to go to Israel, no. I actually met with George Krutz and Daniel Clenin, who was then the Vice President of the IFF, we were sitting in the corner of a fishermen’s bar. See you’ve got to understand Skottevig. You fly into Oslo and then you fly another hour into Christiansand in the south and then you travel 34 km to this place. We stayed in these huts that are more normally used by fishermen – it was a beautiful setting for an Assembly.

R: Isolated.

C: Isolated. Great natural beauty, beautiful place... very moving place: but no phones in the rooms, no internet connection and so the easy connection was the cell phone. So it was

decided that I should go. I made the arrangements, rearranged my flights... I'm calling our copyright lawyer in Chicago, swiping my IFF President's credit card in the public phone – there were about forty 8 Croner telephone calls before I ended up talking with him! I was the last person there after the Assembly – I was sitting alone and it was actually kind of lonely that night when everybody had gone.

R: The weight of the presidency; The future of the materials; What should I do?

C: That's right and I was going off to war-torn Israel on my own. Some in my family were worried. I didn't tell my mother where I was going until I got back! So I go into Christiansand and I fly into Oslo and try to negotiate with KLM and get some money back on the tickets. I buy my ticket from Paris to Tel Aviv at the Air France counter at the Oslo Airport. Then I fly onto Amsterdam – have a rest there with a colleague – I was tired from the Assembly. Then take the train down to Paris and stay one day with François Combeau, the founding president of the IFF and the person who really negotiated the first contracts for materials with Michel. He was very supportive.

I get on this airplane to Tel Aviv and it was one of the most turbulent flights I'd ever been on! Here I am worried to death I'm going to get shot down and the weather was awful for the plane all the way from Paris...

R: Bouncing around?

C: Yeah bouncing around. Yeah so that didn't do anything for my mood!

I don't want to over dramatize the safety thing, because Israeli people live with this all the time, but you know, it was a real choice to go to Tel Aviv at this time. When the IFF first went to Tel Aviv for the 1994 Assembly, it was just after the Oslo Accords were signed – it was very peaceful,

people were very optimistic. But by 2002, it was pretty hot! The day I arrived in Tel Aviv, there was a bombing where 17 to 20 people had been killed in Jerusalem.

So I arrived safely in Tel Aviv and went and stayed in the hotel where we had stayed for the 1994 Assembly. The Israeli IFF Representative, Ilan Jacobson, had organized a deal for me, with a friend of his who was a travel agent who got a good price for us. So I stayed in my familiar old hotel and every day for six days, every day, I went to the Feldenkrais Institute.

R: Describe the Institute.

C: Michel had moved the Institute to a bigger space from Nachmani Street where it had been in the basement there since Moshe had set it up. I went to the new Institute. It was nice inside and Michel had done renovations. It was really quite inspiring to be there because there were all these people who would roll in several times a day to do Alexander Yanai ATM classes with Moshe on tape! I worked in the office continuously for six days, except, of course I took shabat off!

R: Can you describe the site where the materials were?

C: There was Michel's office and at the back of it was a compactus, about six rolling shelves of tapes, etc. I started off, I had my laptop with me, and I set it up on the table and Michel just kept bringing me things from the shelves and I kept going - typing - at great speed because there turned out to be around 850 items of audio visual materials and the 1700 photographs.

R: You looked at every photograph?

C: I counted every photograph and I looked at a lot of them. Well there wasn't lots of time, but we did stop and look at things.. It was hot, it was really hot, in the 90s Fahrenheit, and humid. I put little stickers on them and numbered everything and created a database from scratch. I

entered what ever I could that was obvious that would allow the materials to be identified later so what kind of media it was on, if anything was inscribed on it, dates especially.

R: So you had to read everything and type it in?

C: Yeah that's right, and try to kind of work out what went together in a series. A lot of materials were together, but some of them were a bit jumbled up. We were also talking about how to send them – because things get lost in international shipping. In the end we decided that we'd send them Federal Express, We took out insurance. Michel had a big roll of bubble wrap there so I lined the boxes in bubble wrap. Then I repacked everything and checked it against the database as I reloaded it and found a few mistakes then and tried to check the accuracy and we ended up with eight standard size shipping boxes. I also called Barbara Greenfield (FGNA/FEFNA Executive Director) and said, "We want to get this stuff into America but we don't want to pay any customs duties so can we send it to FEFNA?" FEFNA was relatively new then and we didn't have time to consult with the Board, and she made an executive decision right there on the phone.

C: I wrote up a shipping label to FEFNA and photocopied it so they're all the same. When you ship something from Israel, it's no easy thing. You've got to call up and prearrange the shipment. You've got to talk to the shipping people about the process of shipping and collecting everything but you've got to talk to the security agent of the shipping company and they want to know a lot of things about your stuff. They give you an authorization number and their ID that goes on the carton that they have interviewed you.

R: Did you have some trouble getting out of the country?

C: In addition to the eight boxes of audiovisual materials there was a whole lot of photographs – and also some film – which were a bit delicate and Michel and I decided that I should carry them with me. I went down to Ben Yehuda Street – there were a lot of closed shops. A lot of the

stores, the doors were locked and there was no handle on the outside. You had to come and knock on the door and get them to let you in.

I went to this bag store with this lovely old Israeli couple and they said hopefully, "Oh! You're a tourist! Do you want a bag?" I said, "No, I've got these archival materials I want to take out of the country". They said, "What kind of archival materials?" "Oh, stuff about Moshe Feldenkrais." And they said, "Oh, the man who taught Ben Gurion to stand on his head? Ben Gurion's wife used to come and buy her bags here." So then they were really nice to me. He cut out this extra foam padding to protect the photographs to put in the bag. I go back to the Institute, put all the photos in the bag, and the film and everything. A lot of the photos were really kind of curled so I put them on backing. There were all those little pieces of Masonite at the Institute so I wrapped the photos in paper, put rubberbands around them and backed them on this stuff that would hold them and I tried to keep them in clumps of numbers of photos because there were numbers on the back. Some of them were in sequences that were used for the drawings for Judo and Higher Judo. I tried to keep them in sequences. I went off to the airport the next day.

R: When you were going through the materials were there certain things that really excited you? Can you talk a little more about what you were discovering as you were cataloging.

C: There was a lot of stuff that it was not clear what it was but stuff that was clearly very old, old audio tapes and things like that and then...if it had a Hebrew label I'd go over and ask him Michel what was on it. Like the Aaron Meshkin tape, for example, the interview with the actor from the Israel National Theater. He was able to translate that for me and so he knew many of the materials. Then there were a whole lot of materials I'd never heard of, and then there were materials that had been published already – there was a whole mix of things.

R: Did you see any surprises?

C: Well I think the stuff that was really exciting were the photos of Moshe as a young man and doing Judo. Some of those photos with him with Koizumi from the 1930s from Paris. The ones of him doing the mock knife fights, using tables and dressed in suits and all that. There are photos of him when the Japanese foreign minister came. And then the photos of Moshe in pre-state Israel, of Palestine in the 1920s and 1930s doing martial arts and tumbling on the roofs of these classic Tel Aviv apartments looking very tropical and Moshe looking so young and fit. A whole different era of Moshe. That was exciting – and some of the newspaper articles from the 1930s capturing the flavor of Paris at the time and the article in Danish about when he went to the human potential conference in Copenhagen in the 50s.

R: Did you get a feeling of the breadth of time that the Method developed over?

C: Yeah, and the fact that Moshe was recording audio stuff from the 50s through to the 80s. And that he had the vision to use the technology, which at the time was tape recorders, and then video, to record his work. That was really something. And the amount of the materials was really exciting.

R: Let's return to leaving the country.

C: I took the taxi to the airport and as I'd been to Israel once before, I knew security was tough. I knew that I had all these red flags and sure enough they went up. I get there to do the interview and you've got the person who is doing the interview, which is a young guy and you've got the supervisor about twenty paces away, who is a young woman kind of observing the interaction—so first it's like, "Who are you?" I've got an Australian passport right, but I live in America. So that's a little red flag. So "Where have you been?" OK, Norway, OK. So show us your tickets, Oh, you've cancelled your tickets back from Amsterdam to America and you booked a ticket on Air France from Paris to Tel Aviv and back,? It's like big red flag now. Big red flag. What were you doing here? I was picking up materials for an archive, etc, etc. I have this letter from

the Institute... Of course that doesn't count, you can get a letter from anybody for anything. That doesn't count for diddley. My credit card, the IFF credit card, only had my name on it, 'Monsieur Clifford Smyth', not anything about the International Feldenkrais Federation. "Why doesn't your credit card have the business name on it?" OK, so then the classic question, "Are you carrying anything that somebody gave you to take." "Yes! A whole lot of archival materials." Hello, it's like red flag, red flag, red flag! "Did you buy a bag in Israel" "Yes I did!" More red flags. I look at him and I know I'm in for the third degree.

R: Were you nervous?

C: A little but, but I also knew it was going to happen. I know I'm going to get the third degree. He goes over and checks with the supervisor and chats with her, which is normal, they usually check in with the supervisor who has been observing the interaction and there's my bag and credit cards and letter from the Institute, all laid out on top of my bags and I think he's going to bring the supervisor over and she's going to give me the third degree. He comes back and he said, "I'm sorry but I'm just going to have to take you to this other facility and check your bags." I pack up all my ID, my documents, my dead tickets from Amsterdam back to San Francisco that they wouldn't give me any money back on... Off we go to this kind of interrogation area with long metal tables, about three rows of them, very prison-like.

We get the bags that have the photos in them, so he takes out these bunches of photos with the rubber bands and the cardboard and wood behind them, and he runs the metal detector over every one of them. We're talking seventeen hundred photos here. After he's got all the photos out and he's looked inside every one of those little canisters of 35 mm negatives, everything. Then they take the bag and the bag spends twenty minutes or half an hour away in the back room. I hear people talking. We're just kind of standing there, tapping our feet - you don't just chat in the midst of an interrogation this. I presume that they basically took the bag apart and made sure there wasn't anything explosive in it. Tried all the sniffing technology or

maybe dogs... Finally the bag comes back looking a little askew or maybe a little twisted – but it's okay. There's this piece of foam that the guy in the store had provided. He said, "OK, good." I think he's going to check all the rest of my bags, but he doesn't. So as I'm starting to pack the photos back in he says, "Can I look at some of those?" So I get one of the packets of photos and I take the rubber bands off and peel the paper back and he has a look and says, "So this is the old man himself, eh?" "Oh, do you know about Feldenkrais?" "Well, everybody in Israel, everyone knows about Feldenkrais. I go to this gym where there's Feldenkrais classes and a practitioner. I do Aikido myself – so these photos are really interesting."

He knew about Feldenkrais all along – but didn't hint in any way through the whole process that he knew who Moshe was, what the Feldenkrais Method was. He was the consummate professional security officer until finally they decided I was kosher and were going to let me through and then he says, "Show me the photos!"

I got on the plane, breathed a sigh of relief, put the photos in the overhead bin. I flew Tel Aviv to Paris. I arrived late, stayed in an airport hotel and the next morning I flew out to San Francisco. The boxes went right to Portland, no trouble. They were put in storage fairly quickly. They were opened and checked by Penny McCornack (IFF Project Manager). The first time they were handled was when the Archive Working Group has been formed and we went to Portland to start working on them.

R: While you were doing this, what was your own motivation, what were you thinking? Were you focused on the task or did you have an idea of the larger purpose?

C; I had a focus on the larger purpose because I'd been IFF president for 4, 5 years by then and I'd taken over responsibility for the materials and it seemed important to get the materials and put them in good storage conditions and preserve them.

R: Is there anybody you'd like to acknowledge through the whole process?

C: Obviously Michel for making them available to the whole community and trusting the IFF and me with the materials. I remember waiting for the airport taxi with him and saying goodbye to him and there was a real moment of....it was a really big thing for him, who had been given a mandate from the family to look after the materials, to pass them on to the community, with me acting for the community was important.

It was not the easiest time to visit Israel and I was working hard – Ilan Jacobson who was really great. He made sure I had walks on the beach, moral support, an opportunity to talk about things. And I should acknowledge the people back home who were worried about me.

Somehow it all came together, it wasn't so hard. We signed a contract and had this intention and wondered "How are we going to do it, do we really want to ship it?" We needed someone to go to the Institute and pack the materials, do a data base, personally, hands on...

R: The community owes you a great debt.

C: I feel like it was a good thing to do.

R: Well considering possible alternatives, it was very important.

C: They might have been lost to the weather in Tel Aviv, or whatever. It was important that they weren't lost and that some people took stewardship of them on behalf of the community. I think the international body is the best one to do that because the materials are in different languages and there are materials that don't have much commercial value, like the newspaper articles, and yet it's important they be preserved.

R: I want to thank you for telling this story, I've been after you to tell it for some time. My reason is that it's important to understand that the way these things happen is through the actions of individuals...taking advantage of circumstances. You had to go to Israel you had to deal with



what you told us about and do it. The reason to tell the story is to encourage others that when there are things to be done, people should go ahead and do them. And to publicly commend you and the IFF for taking these steps. Of course it would not have been possible without the foresight and generosity of Michel Silice Feldenkrais, so it's appropriate to again thank him here.