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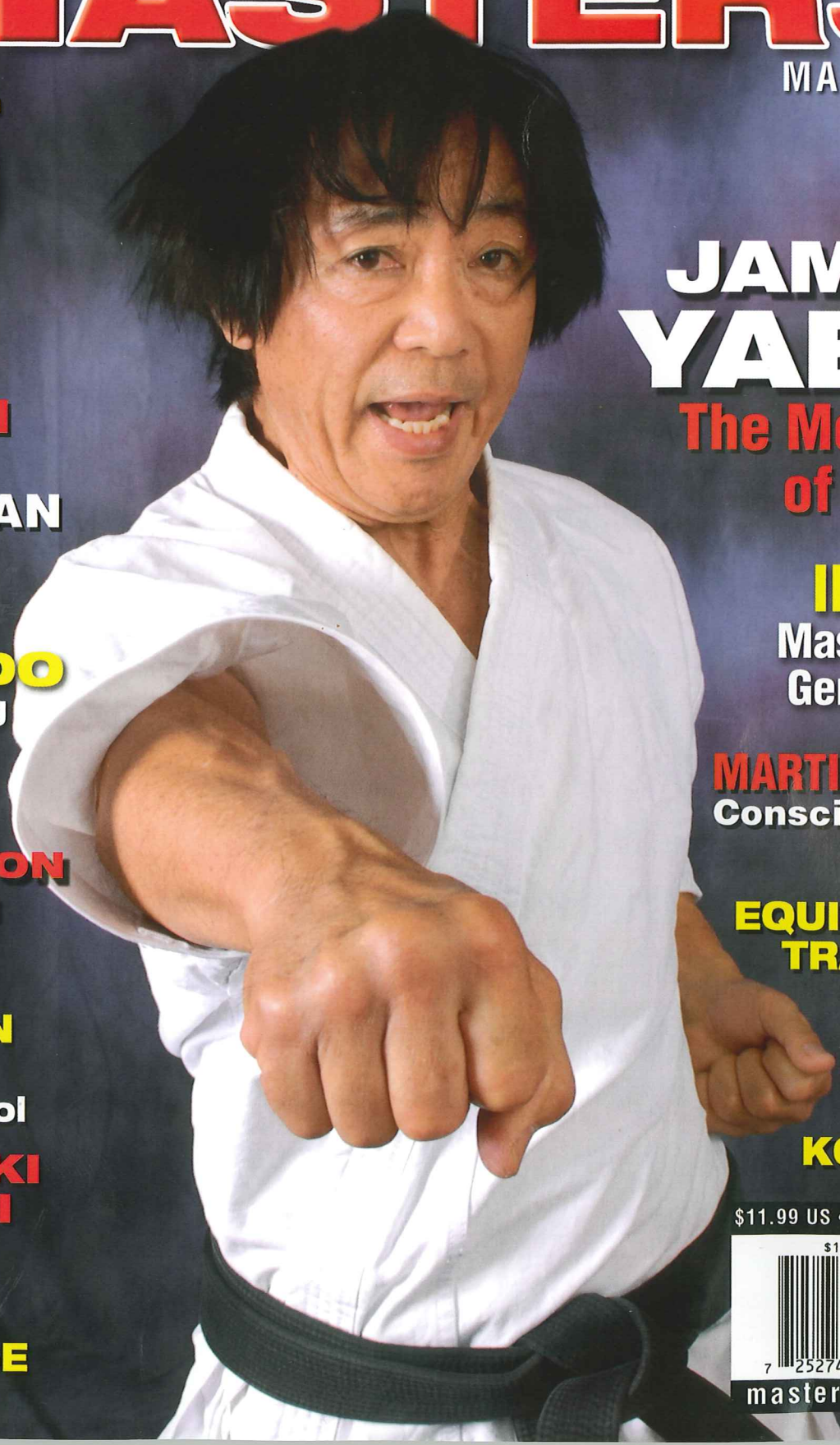

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Shadows of

Yagyu Muneyoshi

Directly following the match, the swordsmen traveled to the village of Yagyu, located along the border between the districts of Nara and Kyoto, near Mt. Kasagi. Hosting generations of the Yagyu family since the eleventh century, the hamlet of Yagyu was known as a kakure-zato (hidden village). Surrounded by mountains on all sides, this remote settlement was difficult to reach; many kakure-zato were isolated in winter because of the difficulty of traveling through snowy mountain passes. Here Nobutsuna taught the eager "reborn" student-master Yagyu Muneyoshi. The robust and challenging intensive training took place for two years, at which point, in 1565, Nobutsuna finally announced to Muneyoshi that there was no more he could teach him. He presented Muneyoshi with an inka, a certificate in which the essential secrets of the Shinkage School were encoded, along with the declaration that Muneyoshi was the chosen head of the style. This hidden—transference of mastery—was the method of initiation in many Japanese arts. The certificate acknowledged that the master possessing it was qualified in passing along the art intact as it was conveyed by the founding master. Shortly thereafter Nobutsuna left the village of Yagyu, and the historical record is unclear of his story from this point forward. It also is at this point that the Yagyu Shinkage style was born.

Muneyoshi had been influenced profoundly by Nobutsuna in more ways than the revolutionary techniques of training in the sword. Muneyoshi's philosophy had been changed in the process. Gone was the blinding pride in his new abilities, since one of Nobutsuna's essential characteristics was his profound modesty. Also, Muneyoshi now came to view the sword as less an instrument of killing, but more a means of elevating and empowering the individual studying the art. As the head of this newly formed school, Muneyoshi saw that his personal mandate was to incorporate other styles he had studied (Shinto, Tomita, and Nen) into the Yagyu Shinkage style. The other charge, placed on him by Nobutsuna, was to perfect muto (swordlessness or "No-sword"). In this context, muto was the ability to face an armed assailant empty-handed, even in a surprise attack, and prevail. Muneyoshi indeed finally perfected the difficult technique, and word spread far and wide.

PART 2

the Sword

By Patrick Barry & Photos by Bob Anderson

An avid student of swordsmanship himself, the powerful daimyo and future shogun, Tokugawa Ieyasu had heard of this mysterious and legendary school and the powerful technique, and he finally invited the now 66-year-old master to meet him at his summer villa in Takagamine, on the outskirts of Kyoto. Muneyoshi arrived and complied with a demonstration of muto. His youngest son, Yagyu Munenori, accompanied him and participated in the demonstration. Ieyasu was impressed, but still unconvinced of the Yagyu's mastery of muto. The daimyo took up a bokken and faced Muneyoshi himself. The muto master adopted a slightly different posture, arms hanging low in front, swaying, as Ieyasu suddenly attacked with a powerful overhead strike. In an instant Muneyoshi dodged, grabbed the sword's hilt, and an instant later the sword flew out of the shogun's hand. Controlling the army general with one arm, Muneyoshi delivered a light but decisive chest blow, which still left Ieyasu staggering back.

Profoundly impressed, Ieyasu now informed Muneyoshi he wanted him to be his private sword instructor. Explaining he was too old for the honor of this duty, the master suggested that Yagyu Munenori, his youngest son, fill the role. Ieyasu agreed, and with that agreement, the destiny of the Yagyu School was cemented in history.

Yagyu Munenori

In the following years, Ieyasu kept Munenori close, not just as his personal sword teacher but also as his trusted advisor. It became abundantly clear to the daimyo that the lessons the Yagyu offered had great value well beyond the specific domain of swordsmanship. Indeed the wisdom imparted by the Yagyu master had direct applications in civil administration and even in commanding large armies. These were invaluable assets for someone with an eye on the title shogun (military governor of Japan), especially with the threat of warfare constantly threatening to spark in these historic and volatile times.

The largest and most decisive of battles in the Age of Civil Wars was the Battle of Sekigahara, in the fall of 1600. It involved virtually all the feudal lords of the country, decided the course of Japanese history for years to come, and would assure the Tokugawa line of power for generations.

Photos Courtesy Hal Sharp

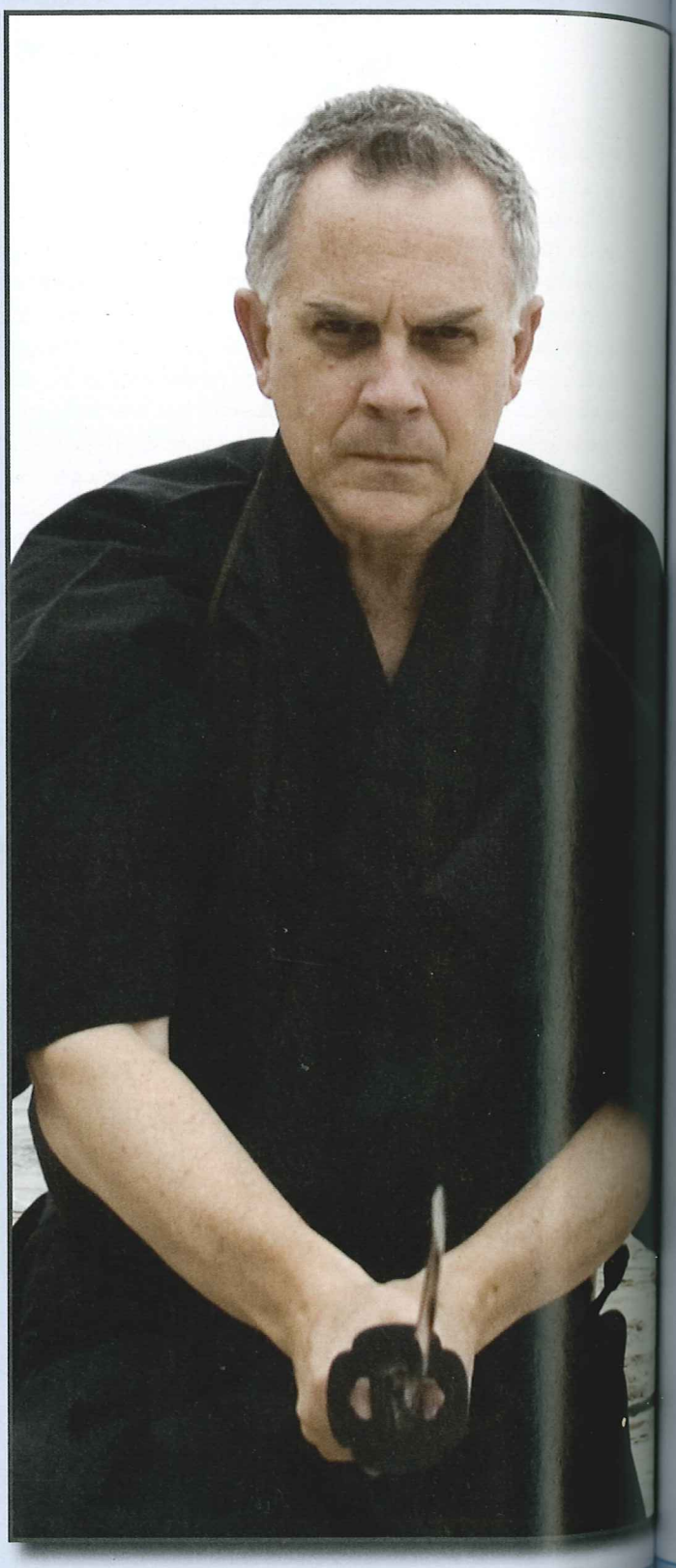
Shadows of the Sword

Preparations for this pivotal battle required Munenori to travel back to his father in Yagyu, where the daimyo sought the support of Yagyu for "undercover" espionage and surveillance. Many interpret the message Munenori carried in this mission as compelling Muneyoshi to use his family connections with in-laws located in nearby Koga and Iga provinces—the heartland of the secretive and close-knit ninja families. Ieyasu's need was for surveillance and disruption of the enemy who sided with the Toyotomi shogunate. While the Yagyu sphere of influence was comparatively small, it was focused in a crucial strategic region in the balance of power between the west and the east. Tokugawa Ieyasu commanded the army of the east in his bid to take complete control of the country and attain the title shogun. Forces of the west were loyal to Toyotomi, and Yagyu lay in between.

After the battle, Tokugawa Ieyasu's bid for shogun was assured and Munenori was awarded the rank of hatamoto (direct vassal to the shogun) with a stipend of 3,000 koku. This also included the return of a fief in and around Yagyu that had been confiscated by Oda Nobunaga, an earlier shogun. These rewards placed Yagyu Munenori in a station high above what any sword instructor, even to a shogun, normally ever could hope to achieve.

Two years after the battle, Ieyasu ceded power to his son Hidetada, who also had been a student of the Yagyu master. Designating Hidetada as the next shogun was a contributing factor to the Battles of Winter and Summer that soon followed. At the Battle of Summer, in Osaka, Munenori's value was seen in the only recorded account of the sword master's taking of another life. He was entrusted with guarding Hidetada when a group of Toyotomi's special attack force broke through the inner defense perimeter. Munenori personally struck down seven warriors, helped drive the attacking force into retreat, and delivered the shogun to safety. His extreme value to the shogunate was clearly apparent, as his reputation for swordsmanship widened.

Indeed, Munenori would be the favored sword teacher to three successive shoguns, and his official ranks continued to climb within the Tokugawa hierarchy. In 1623, he became the personal sword teacher to the third Tokugawa shogun: Iemitsu. While Hidetada was appreciative of Munenori's wisdom and protective presence, he was not an inspired student of swordsmanship. Iemitsu, on the other hand, seemed to have an undying thirst to learn more and more about the way of the sword. This shogun also was known as an impatient man. A large part of the relationship between the two involved Iemitsu constantly pushing Munenori to teach him more and more, and never being satisfied with what was of-



The legendary Ryusho Sakagami practicing Iaido.

fered in the master's teachings. A famous letter was written to Munenori by the shogun after Iemitsu was awarded the inka of the Yagyu Shinkage secrets. The shogun's letter of reply scolded the Yagyu master for not giving the shogun enough attention in his teachings. This demanding relationship continued to Munenori's dying day.

One story is told of Iemitsu hosting a series of sword matches, to which a samurai named Suwa Bunkuro was invited to participate. Bunkuro was known as a master equestrian, and claimed he could beat anyone, as long as he was mounted on a horse. Indeed, every challenger Iemitsu sent against him was defeated by the equestrian samurai. Desperate for a victory, the shogun ordered his personal sword instructor to the challenge. Without hesitation, Munenori mounted the horse, armed with a bokken. As Bunkuro approached, confident of one more victory, Munenori slapped his opponentís horse with the wooden sword. As the horse reared, and Bunkuro struggled to regain control of his steed, Munenori struck him from his horse. This was a classic Yagyu Shinkage technique, in that the teachings strived to never let the mind stop, and always to maintain a sense of dynamic inner flow. Unintimidated by the horse, Munenori immediately found the one thing that would make Bunkuro's mind stop, and executed it without pause. In doing so he created

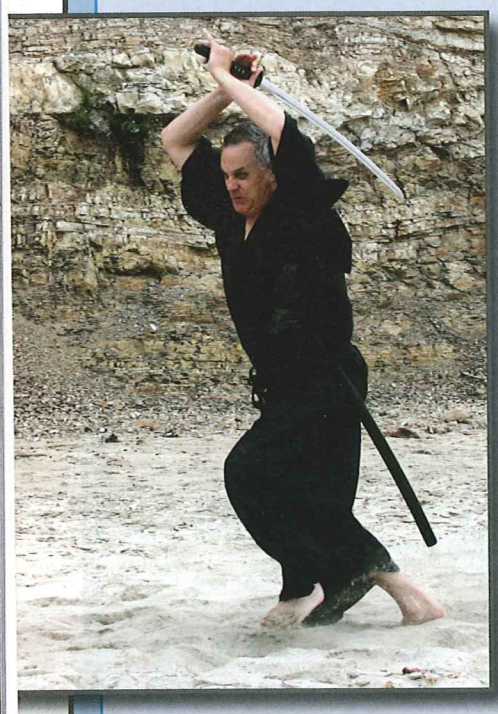
Shadows of the Sword

Bunkuro's vulnerability and avenue of defeat.

Indeed, it also was during his tenure with Tokugawa Iemitsu that two important milestones of Munenori's life were noted in history. The first was his long-standing relationship with the Zen Buddhist priest Takuan Soho. The second was authoring the Heiho Kaden Sho ("The Life-Giving Sword" aka "The Book of Clan Traditions on the Martial Arts") which was a comprehensive book on the teachings of the Yagyu Shinkage Ryu, completed in 1632. It is said to even have inspired the famed swordsman Miyamoto Musashi to write his legendary treatise on swordsmanship entitled Go Rin No Sho ("Book of Five Rings") in 1645. These two events are related in a number of ways.

tion between the martial arts and Zen. Numerous quotes from this work are found in Munenori's master work Heiho Kaden Sho, which elaborated on the theme developed by his predecessors in the study of sword, and how the spiritual heart of training is focused on the vitality it offers the student, not the capability of killing it also brings. Munenori's work also is balanced with descriptions of numerous physical techniques that form the bedrock of Yagyu Shinkage technique. This work was read widely in Munenori's time, for generations to come, and it still is read today.

Munenori's influence on the teaching traditions of the Yagyu family was profound. The legacy of the Yagyu Shinkage Ryu continues to live on today, having been passed down



The years-long relationship between the Yagyu sword master and the Zen priest started in their youths, and carried across decades, finally resulting in Munenori convincing the renowned priest to take a post within the shogunate as an advisor. The influence of Takuan on Munenori, the shogun, and the country in turn, cannot be underestimated. Takuan's philosophical influence at this time also is recognized and associated with the transformation of martial arts study from an era plagued by violent warfare to one of a more peaceful spirit, one imbued with the Zen mind. Takuan wrote Fudochi Shinmyo R ku (Divine Record of Immoveable Wisdom) for Munenori, a short treatise that articulated the connec-

through the son of Muneyoshi's eldest son (Yagyu Yoshikatsu): Yagyu Hyogonosuke. It is this sword master who went on to teach others in the Tokugawa family, and who faced Miyamoto Musashi in another form of competition: a friendly game of Go. This line of masters has continued to today, where the twenty-first grand master of the form known as Owari Yagyu Shinkage Ryu continues to teach students.

And so, with the drawing of the sword, the katana, the stories of the masters continue to be told. Yet, it is those with the training to know what to listen for who truly can hear these stories.