

Pierre de Coubertin at the 8th Olympic Congress in Prague

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Fifty years have gone by since the 8th Olympic Congress, which was the last convened by the Baron Pierre de Coubertin and held in Prague from 29th May to 4th June 1925. Actually there were two distinct assemblies—the Technical Olympic Congress, presided by Mr. J. Sigfrid Edström, member of the Executive Board of the International Olympic Committee, and the Pedagogical Olympic Congress, presided by Dr. K. Weigner, professor at the Faculty of Medicine at the University of Prague. There was one common official opening for the two assemblies. Pierre de Coubertin delivered a remarkable speech, his last before such an Olympic assembly, since the day before the Congresses he had resigned as President of the International Olympic Committee—a post he had held for thirty years.

Two sets of minutes were drawn up—one for the Technical Olympic Congress in French and English, and the other for the Pedagogical Olympic Congress in French and Czech. Only the latter minutes contain Pierre de Coubertin's speech at the opening ceremony. It is a real legacy for the Renovator's Olympic successors.

In it, Pierre de Coubertin showed the path to ensure the development of mass sport:

«To make the various forms of sport—all sports—available as nearly cost-free as possible to all citizens, that will be one of the duties of modern local government. And that is why I have campaigned for the restoration of the municipal gymnasium of the ancient world, to be accessible to all without regard to opinions, beliefs or social rank and placed under the direct and sole authority of the city. In that way and only in that way will a healthy and completely sporting generation be created.

«A Utopian notion is to imagine that sport can be officially united with moderation in the name of science, and constrained to live with her. It would be an unnatural marriage. Sport cannot be made timid and cautious

without its vitality being compromised... This is not to say that scientific control must be done away with, but it must come in the guise of a councillor and not a despot. Moreover it could do with reform itself, for it neglects a whole tract of its realm through its insistence on being merely physiological and forgetting to be psychological...

«I don't think the present Congress can be expected to produce a unique definition of the amateur which could be applied to all forms of sport. The primary goal towards which we should bend all our efforts is to ensure that in each Federation the current ruling is honorably enforced. We are far from this goal. A lot of cheating and lying goes on. It is the repercussion in the sporting world of a moral decline. Sport has grown up within a society which the lust for money is threatening to rot to its marrow. It is for the sports clubs now to set a good example by returning to the code of honour and sincerity...

«The renewed Olympism will be the force best able to undertake this task of purification, provided people stop wanting to turn the Olympic Games into world championships. It is because they are imbued with this idea that some technicians are for ever trying to destroy the Olympic constitution in order to seize a power which they think they are fitted to exercise absolutely...

«May harmony reign between the three powers—International Committee, National Olympic Committees, International Federations; this will be the right way of maintaining the Olympic Games at the desirable level.

«Do I need to recall that the Olympic Games are not the property of any country or race in particular and cannot be monopolised by any kind of group? They are world-wide; all nations must be admitted to them without discussion just as all forms of sport must be treated on an equal footing... The Games were created for the glorification of the individual champion, whose prowess is necessary to sustain the general ardour and ambition.



The IOC members in Prague. From left to right: Count Alberto Bonacossa (Italy), Marquis Melchior de Polignac (France), Earl Cadogan (Great Britain), Baron Pierre de Coubertin, X..., Count de Penha Garcia (Portugal), Baron Godefroy de Blonay (Switzerland), Senator Jules de Muzsa (Hungary), Mr. Ivar Nyholm (Denmark), Mr. Angelo C. Bolanaki (Egypt), Baron A. Schimmelpenninck van der Oye (Holland), Baron de Laveleye (Belgium), Mr. Ernst Krogius (Finland) and Councillor Jiri Guth-Jarkovsky (Czechoslovakia).

The circumstances do not lend themselves to the addition of too many team encounters, since the need to limit the duration of the Games, and thereby the expenses they occasion, has been generally recognised. Great economies can be effected in the celebration of an Olympiad if it is sufficiently prepared in advance, and with a high degree of method, discipline and disinterest...

"I want to be able to devote the time which remains to me to speeding in so far as I can an urgent enterprise—the introduction of a pedagogy productive of mental clarity and critical calm. In my opinion the future of civilisation depends solely on the direction which will be given to education. The social question itself will find no lasting solution outside this field.

"Obstinate in error, contemporary pedagogics has led the present generations into the blind alley of outright specialisation, in which they will ultimately find nothing but darkness and disunion... The hour has come to raise a pedagogic edifice whose architecture is more fitted to the needs of the day.

"To dwell any longer on this point would be to transgress the limits imposed by the character of this assembly. No doubt I have already surprised if not shocked some listeners by revealing revolutionary tendencies at an age when the conservative instinct usually becomes more marked. But I

owed to my fellow-workers and faithful friends a frank explanation of my intentions. I also wanted to tell them that I am tackling the new task in the sporting spirit which we have fostered together, that is with joy in effort, a relish for risk, and a devotion to a disinterested ideal."

In the "*Mémoires olympiques*" (page 9) Pierre de Coubertin wrote on the 1892 Congress in Paris when he announced his plan to re-establish the Olympic Games:

"... Nobody understood. It was the beginning of a total, complete incomprehension which was to last for a long time." In spite of all the cheers!

The reaction was the same, I think, after Pierre de Coubertin's speech at Prague. A lot of people did not understand or did not try to understand the force of the ideas expressed by Coubertin. Even his friends did not seem to share his ideas on the high pedagogical aim of the Olympic Games, the connection between pedagogics and Olympism and his conviction that a complete reform of the existing pedagogical system was inevitable if it wished to survive.

One would think that such a speech would have been followed by echoes and reflections in the discussions at the two Congresses. That the participants would have endeavoured to enlarge upon the points raised by Coubertin, sought the means to put them into practice,

or else critically analysed them. That someone would have stood up and officially wished Coubertin good luck and success in his new work in the field of world pedagogics. Nothing of the sort. We can look through the reports of the two Congresses; there is no mention of such events.

Nevertheless there are two interesting points in the minutes of the Technical Congress. In his speech Colonel R. M. Thompson (USA) made a noteworthy statement:

“Sport without the great Olympic idea is nothing. The Olympic idea is the direct cause of the growing importance of sports over the last few years. Progress in all fields, in all events, can be seen from one Olympiad to the next. The quality increasing on account of the inspiration and understanding, spread by the Olympic organisation, that the moral tone is what has to be upheld... If sport escaped from the IOC’s high control, the age of prosperity reached or foreseen by certain federations would go out like a light.”

And in the report of the Technical Congress Commission on Sports Education, presided

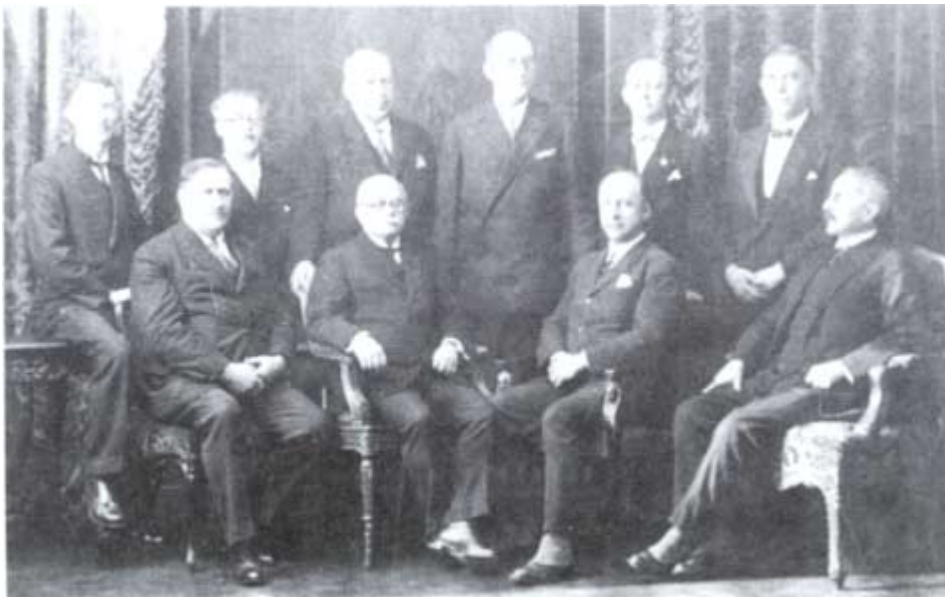
by the IOC member for Great Britain, Rev. R. S. de Courcy-Laffan, we read: *“The Commission feels that in order to reach fruitful conclusions it is necessary to define the terms in use. By “sport” it means not competition alone in games and physical exercise, but that well-balanced competition inspired by uprightness both towards one’s opponent and one’s fellow, by the abnegation of the self, and by the idea of the service to be rendered by the individual to the group to which he belongs—team, fatherland, humanity.”*

The Technical Olympic Congress, attended by 29 members of the International Olympic Committee, 39 delegates of the National Olympic Committees, and 26 representatives of the International Federations, marked a very positive result.

It approved the decision of the IOC Session to institute the Olympic Winter Games.

Pierre de Coubertin wrote in his *“Mémoires olympiques”*: *“The Winter Games were completely victorious. I was happy, having always wished to see this winter addition duly legalised...”*

The Executive Board of the Czechoslovakian NOC in 1925.





The commemorative medal of the 8th Olympic Congress.

All the same, the question of amateurism took up most of the discussions at the Technical Congress. It was decided that:

“Anyone who knowingly is or has been a professional in his sport or in another sport, or anyone who has received payments in compensation for loss of salary, shall not be qualified to participate in the Games.”

This decision, a victory for the champions of “pure amateurism”, made the problem even more acute and only widened the gap of social differences between athletes. This loss of salary! Not until fifty years later—what a lot of time lost!—did these discussions lead to a change in principle at the 10th Olympic Congress at Varna in 1973 and the Vienna Session in 1974.

The Pedagogical Olympic Congress was convened to study the direction to be taken in a few special sectors of sport of a psychophysiological nature proposed by Pierre de Coubertin:

- to do away with exhibitionism at sports competitions;
- to bring back the educational value of boxing fights;
- to limit sporting efforts during adolescence in order not to speed up the virile development of youngsters;
- to nominate sports that could be practised by women without inconveniencing their health;
- to encourage the development of fair play and chivalry;
- to increase the collaboration of universities in sport;

- to organise the preventive cure of sport for the different age groups;
- to institute events without competitions, based on minima to be exceeded and open to everybody.

The composition of the delegations was very varied. Besides representatives of the Ministries of Education and Health, there were doctors, physical education teachers, members of National Olympic Committees, etc. Among the 82 members registered there were 16 Czechs. As for the IOC members, Pierre de Coubertin alone attended all the meetings, and three others—de Baillet-Latour, de Blonay and de Courcy-Laffan—only one.

The President of the Pedagogical Congress, Weigner, was professor of medicine at the university. In Czechoslovakia at that time public health and physical education came under the same ministry. This was also so in many other countries. In general the organisation of sports medicine at that time was superior to the organisation of pedagogics. This is why at the Pedagogical Congress in Prague the medical side sometimes prevailed over the pedagogical side.

Even if the Pedagogical Congress did not bring everything that Pierre de Coubertin hoped—let us not forget that it was the first Olympic assembly of this kind—the results of the sometimes confused discussions are not inconsiderable.

At the after-Congress banquet, Mr. Rössler-Orovsky, for more than twenty years Secretary General of the Czechoslovakian Olympic Committee, took the floor to thank Pierre de Coubertin: *“For many years he was the only person to protect Czech sports expeditions abroad. 25 years ago sport was for us Czechs the only way—besides our art—in which we could manifest our national existence. To Mr. de Coubertin goes the great credit that we could march in the file of nations at the Olympics under the flag of Bohemia.”* Turning to Pierre de Coubertin:

“Mr. President and friend! Let me assure you of our deep gratitude for everything you have done for us. We shall never forget you!”

F. K.

