

Art and Sport

"HOHROD AND ESCHBACH" A MYSTERY FINALLY SOLVED

In 1912, the artistic and literary competitions that Pierre de Coubertin had described at the Consultative Conference held at the *Comédie Française* in Paris six years earlier, but which the organizers of the London Games in 1908 had been unable to include through lack of time, figured on the Olympic programme alongside traditional sports. The Stockholm jury faced a difficult task in choosing between the written works it had been sent. One stood out in particular.

It was a short piece, a prose poem or, to be more precise, an "Ode to Sport", nine verses long, curiously presented in two different language versions: in German first - over three pages - and then in French, with exactly the same page layout. These nine short verses glorified the virtues of sport: "*pleasure of the Gods, essence of life*", "*you are Beauty! Justice! Audacity! Honour! Joy! Fecundity! Progress!*", "*you are Peace! . . . From you, the young world-wide learn self-respect, and thus the diversity of national qualities becomes the source of a generous and friendly rivalry.*".

Aware of the loftiness of the thoughts expressed in this rapidly moving text, which attempted to convey the essentials - albeit in words that were clearly far removed from those later used in avant-garde literature; struck also, no doubt, by the astonishing combined efforts of a German-speaker and a Frenchman, which must have seemed like a living expression of the fraternity of Olympism at a time when tensions between the two countries were a major feature of the global landscape: the jury had no hesitation in awarding the gold medal to the two authors.

by Jean Durry*



Only then did they learn that Hohrod and Eschbach were one and the same person.. none other than Coubertin himself! Hence, at the outstanding 1912 Games, whose unqualified success bore witness to the true realization of the adventurous plan drawn up barely twenty years previously, on the evening of 25 November 1892, Coubertin was fortunate enough to appear on the Olympic role of honour himself. He was crowned by his peers, having entered the competition on an equal footing with the other entrants, who were eventually separated according to merit alone.

Although the secret had been well kept - primarily by the author himself - it was not totally impossible to work out the identity of one his two pseudonyms. But you would have to have known that, in 1898..

"Georges Hohrod. Le roman d'un rallié"

It was in 1898 - but who would have read it and which readers would have remembered? - that the "*Revue bleue*" published, in successive issues, a rather interesting work enti-

tled "*Le roman d'un rallié*". It was the story of a French aristocrat rallied to the cause of the Third Republic in spite of the marked preference among people of his social background for the return of the monarchy.

Better still, in 1902 these episodes were republished in a large 322-page volume under the same title, "*Georges Hohrod. Le roman d'un rallié*", by 'Albert Lanier, printer/editor, 42 rue de Paris, Auxerre'. This was the same printer/editor of the "*Chronique de France*", published under Coubertin's supervision between 1900 and 1906 (in seven consecutive volumes), which told the story of life in France every twelve months, the work of a historian keen to map out the main developments of contemporary history. And unless I am mistaken, Mr Lanier also published the monthly "*Olympic Review*", compiled by Coubertin, from 1906 onwards.

However, the tireless Coubertin, who wanted to tackle every genre, had preferred not to risk using his real name in what might have seemed a futile attempt to the microcosm from which he originated and to those accustomed to seeing him work in the fields of pedagogy and the promotion of physical exercise and sport.

Further clues lay in the novel itself, a *roman à clef*. Without going into too much detail, the central character, Etienne de Crusséne, a 24-year old nobleman, embarks on a trip to the United States, the new world, very similar to Coubertin's own American expeditions in 1889 and 1893; the



Pierre de Coubertin holding his daughter Renée next to his wife Mane, his son Jacques and his mother-in-law Mrs Rothan, at the foot of the stone stairs of the Rothan's property in Lutterbach.

Breton Kerarvro Castle to which he returns is an astonishing recreation of the Norman manor house at Mirville; he is tempted to enter the world of politics but, just like Coubertin, resists; in Paris, in the third part of the story, the family home in the middle of the Faubourg Saint-Germain and the

people living there seem to resemble exactly those that the young Pierre must have experienced when he stayed at 20, rue Oudinot; Etienne de Crusséne is invited to the Elysée, just as Coubertin was welcomed personally by the President of the Republic, Sadi Carnot, who thanked him for lov-

ing France; finally, Etienne remains a "free" man, as Coubertin did throughout his life. In any case, if it was thus possible to identify Hohrod as Coubertin and vice versa, did the name mean anything? Where did it come from? And what about the even more indecipherable Eschbach?

Eighty-four years after Stockholm, shortly before 1996, the year of the Games of the XXVI Olympiad of the modern era, the Centennial Games in Atlanta, nobody had solved the enigma and the origin of the two names remained a mystery.

I stumbled across the answer quite by chance. I cannot take much credit for it, because it was so simple and obvious..

The mystery solved

One summer's day, I set off from my family home in a Franche-Comté village on a delightful journey to nearby Alsace (Colmar was only 90 km away). My aim was to find the property in Lutterbach - if it still existed - that had belonged to the Rothan family, where Coubertin spent many happy times in the years following his marriage to Marie, daughter of this Protestant Alsatian family, on 12 March 1895. I had never been there before and wanted to fill this gap in my knowledge of Coubertin's life.

From Colmar, the 604 led me into the Fecht Valley, which became more and more attractive as I approached the Vosges mountains. Less than 20 km away was Munster, a small town where I enjoyed a welcome break on a cafe terrace. Having admired the beautiful red sandstone church, I counted seventeen storks in the sky, circling above their nests. It was the beginning of the afternoon. Before arriving in Lutterbach, I thought it would be good to climb up out of the town for a moment and enjoy the view. The road branched off to the right of that which would have taken us to the *Col de la Schlucht* and then to Gérardmer. Springing up out of the town, the road was rather

steep. We climbed very quickly and were soon rewarded with a vast panorama over Munster and its valley. There were a few chalet-type houses and then, suddenly, by the roadside I saw a sign that made me shout out in surprise: "*Hohrod!*" I stopped the car immediately so I could read the sign and look at my Michelin map and green guidebook, where I read: "*Hohroberg. This pretty summer resort sprawls across sun-drenched slopes. (Here) to the south-west you can find an extensive view of Munster and its valley and, from left to right, of the mountains behind, from the Petit Ballon to the Hohneck.*" Suddenly, all was becoming clear, the light was dawning. While walking from nearby Luttenbach, Pierre de Coubertin had obviously discovered and enjoyed the same panorama that my wife and I had just found, to such an extent that the name Hohrod had come to mind when he had decided to use a pseudonym for his writing.

However, he had used two pseudonyms for the "*Ode to Sport*" entered in Stockholm. Now what? Encouraged by the pleasure, even exhilaration of this discovery - as simple, it must be said, as adding two and two together - I said to my wife, Paule, "*You wait and see - I'm sure there must be an Eschbach somewhere around here.*"

After turning round at Hohroberg, whose altitude was indicated as 750 m (on the road of the "*Collet du Linge*", which reaches around 1000 m), and passing the "Hohrod" sign, which I stared at once again, we drove back down to Munster to take the D10 to Luttenbach, barely 2 km away. This time we were disappointed: the castle had been destroyed, as had the stone stair-

case at the bottom of which a famous photograph had been taken of Pierre, Marie, their children Jacques and René and Marie's mother, Madame Rothan. Only a few beautiful trees and a fountain offered, I think, a vague idea of what the place would have been like. It was now a holiday camp for a large organization.

However, my disillusion was tempered and softened by what was now a genuine hope of solving the second part of the enigma. Back in Munster, with its red sandstone church, I stopped to look at the map. The answer was there in front of me. It jumped out at me, it was so obvious.

Almost directly opposite Hohrod, on the other side of the church tower, on the D10 III, was the name "Eschbach-au-Val".

A short distance away, maybe 1,500 m, like St Thomas I could see the "Eschbach" signs for myself. We walked along the (two) streets of this little village with its original houses. Then, at the end of a beautiful afternoon, we drove through the Vosges forest to the "*Route des Crêtes*" and its vast landscapes.

For a whole Olympiad, I have kept to myself the excitement of this modest discovery. From now on, we can share the satisfaction of this solved mystery. "*Hohrod and Eschbach*"? Almost a century after Pierre de Coubertin, I only had to pass by..

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