



ELIAS KATZ – Memory of a Forgotten Olympic Champion

by Matti Hannus

It is a great honour for a small nation of five million people to have one-hundred and twenty-three Olympic champions in the annals of sport. Among Finnish gold medal winners, Elias Katz is one of the least remembered today. June 22nd will mark the centenary of his short and dramatic life. In the graveyard of a small town by the name of Rehovot, not far away from Tel Aviv and the waves of the Mediterranean Sea, a tombstone among many others marks the last resting place of a Finnish Olympic champion.

“Ellu“, „Elu“, „Elo“ - a dear one has many pet names, but there is surprising lack of material on Elias Katz in the Finnish sports literature. Not much has been written in newspapers or magazines about him. Reasons for this strange fact can be guessed. He left his native country at a young age of 26 and met brutal death in the middle of his manhood just two decades later. As popular and well-liked as Katz was - both as an athlete and as a person - the oblivion around him may be partly explained by his extraction. Even in Finland, being a Jew was something of a strain in the German-minded 1930's under the threatening clouds of World War II.

Elias Katz' paternal grandfather Meir Lipmanof Katzeff was born in Vilna in 1840. His fate was a merciless one. According to the Canton Law then in force, Jewish boys were forcefully obliged to join the Russian army at the tiny age of eight. For most youngsters, the service period of 25 years was an equivalent of a death sentence until the day when the pitiless law was finally withdrawn by Czar Alexander II.

During his military service in Turku, Finland - then part of Russia - Meir shortened his surname to Katz. Jews were not allowed to remain in Finland unless you were a soldier, in which case you could ask for an exception from the Senate. Meir Katz died on 30 March 1917 - some eight months before the independence of Finland - and his grave can be found at Turku Jewish Cemetery.

Meir's family grew to have a daughter and six sons, of whom Schleime Zalman Katz (1870-1939) married Malke Feinik (1872-1919). They had four sons and two daughters. Schmiel, the firstling, was born in 1894, Elieser Wolf 1896, Sara Rifka 1897, Dveire 1899, Elias on 22 June 1901 at Turku, and Haim Isak, the baby of the house, more than a decade later in 1912.

Talent for running

As a schoolboy, Elias Katz found time to work as a shop assistant in the evenings and to play football with his Jewish friends in the colours of a sports club of their own, Judiska Idrottssällskapet. Sulo Kolkka, a middle distance runner himself

and one of the legendary sportswriters in Finland for more than half a century, once recalled Katz's epic start as a runner.

“Among the youth in Turku he was known as an avid dancer, having such an enthusiasm for this pastime that it was not unusual for him, during an evening, to sweat three hard collars to pieces. Perhaps thanks to all this dancing around, he developed lots of endurance. In the summer of 1919 he was encouraged by some of his pals to compete in a 1500 metres race. With no experience whatever, Katz started as fast as he could and passed the first 400 metres in a world-class 58 seconds. In spite of getting very, very tired he somehow managed to reach the finish line as the winner in 4 minutes 19 seconds, falling down on green grass completely spent, but happy.“

Joining local sports club Turun Urheiluliitto, Katz soon became friends with a youngster who already was becoming world famous in the sport - named Paavo Nurmi. From 1921 to 1925 Katz was representing Helsingfors Stjärnan, the Jewish sports club in Helsinki, later known as Makkabi from 1932 and still going strong today.

Defeating Nurmi

What was Paavo Nurmi's share on Elias Katz's path to Olympic glory? We don't have firm evidence on this, but according to Sulo Kolkka, the King of Runners always was cordial with his four-years-younger sportsmate, giving him advice in training matters. Like all runners, Katz too had his strengths and weaknesses. Harri Eljanko - another national-class runner and respected sportswriter, reaching the ripe old age of 100 in November 2000! - once recalled: „175 cm tall and some 60 kilos in weight, Katz had a peculiar rocking style of running - perhaps due to lack of muscular power -, but he had more guts than most of his rivals.“ In the Finnish Championships 1500 metres in 1921 a memorable thing happened. Nurmi - already an Olympic champion in Antwerp - was beaten by Katz, for the only time ever. Well, there were unusual circumstances: the race was Nurmi's fourth during the weekend, including 800 and 5000 metres the previous day and 10 000 metres just a couple of hours before, and by now he was understandably tired, completely out of gas. Katz finished third, Nurmi fifth.

In 1923 Katz was progressing in leaps and bounds, racing in the dual match against France and posting a 1500 metres personal best of 4.04,4 in Stockholm. The harder the competition, the better he was. In the big international meeting in Gothenburg he won the 3000 metres steeplechase in 9.40,8 and then finished second to Edvin Wide of Sweden in the 3000 metres.

Running 20 seconds faster than ever before, his wonderful time of 8.36,4 had been only bettered by Panvo Nurmi among the Finns.

Gold and silver in Paris

Olympic trials in May 1924 saw Katz finish third in the 3000 metres and second to Ville Ritola in the steeplechase. 52 track and field athletes were selected to Paris, eventually bringing home a grand total of 17 medals - ten gold, five silver, two bronze - two of which were due to the fine efforts of Elias Katz. On July 6, Ville Ritola won the 10 000 metres on the Colombes track in a World Record time of 30.23,2. Next day, he won his 3000 metres steeplechase heat just like Katz had done in 9.43,8 a few minutes before.

Ritola went on working hard, winning his 5000 metres heat on July 8 and taking care of the steeple final run on the inside grass field of the stadium the following day. „Among the nine finalists, some of the foreigners took a sprint-like crouch start, which seemed to amuse our boys no end.“ (Martti Jukola, *Olympialaiskisat II*). With his typically stiff action, Ritola immediately ran away from the others, winning easily in 9.33,6. It is worth noting that - „to save time“, as he said he was hurdling straight into the water pit without touching the barriers. Almost 80 years later many of the Kenyans are doing the same! After a relaxed start, Katz had already taken hold of the second place when he suddenly tripped and fell over on a hurdle with two laps to go. Full of anger with himself, he sprang up, now chasing Paul Bontemps of France and Evelyn Montague of Great Britain as hard as he could. “Katz always has a good finish. His friendly smile has gone now. Giving his all, he finally passes his rivals, taking his well-earned silver in 9.44,0.“ (Jukola).

Three days later, the final of the 3000 metres team race looming ahead, Nurmi already had collected gold medals in the 1500 and 5000 metres (with less than an hour to recover) and in perhaps the hottest cross country run ever, the temperature having reached some 40 C. Ritola, meanwhile, had been content with two silvers. Let us remember: during the Paris games Nurmi started seven times in six days and Ritola had eight races in eight consecutive days.

In the team race, Clark of Great Britain surprisingly sped the first of the 500 metres laps in 1.21 - eight-minute speed. He soon was out of contention as was Joie Ray of the U.S.A., who bravely tried to follow the Finns, finally finishing a distant 18th. Nurmi 8.32,0, Ritola 8.40,6... Katz fifth, 8.45,4. At 23 years of age, Elias Katz was an Olympic champion - to this day the only Jew in Finland ever to reach that honour.

Germany and Palestine

Sprinter Hirsch Drisin, another member of Helsingfors *Stjärnan*, also competed on Colombes track. There have been two other Jewish athletes in Finnish Olympic teams: Israel Baran in the 100 metres and 4x100 metres relay in Helsinki 1952, and wrestler Arje Nadbornik in Mexico City 1968.

Elias Katz was running better than ever before in 1926. Member of Turun Urheiluliitto again, he won his third 3000 metres



Elias Katz (r) with Ritola (l) and Nurmi (m) in Paris 1924

steeplechase national title in Viipuri (Viborg, now part of Russia) in a personal best of 9.34,5, which was to remain the fastest in the world for that year.

On July 12, Turun Urheiluliitto 4x1500 metres relay baton was carried to a World Record time of 16.26,2 by Frej Liewendahl, Elias Katz, Niilo Koivunaho and Paavo Nurmi in the Linnea IF international meeting in Stockholm. Surprisingly, the fastest of the quartet was Katz, who ran his leg in 4.03,3, better than his personal best.

Five days later at the Finnish relay championships in Viipuri the order of running was exactly the same, resulting in another World Record of 16.11,4. It was not broken until five years later and would have been good enough for fifth place in the national relays in the year 2000.

In 1925, Katz had caused some stir when joining the Jewish sports club Bar-Kochba in Berlin - „for Zionist reasons“, according to the news report. The club, founded in 1898, was recruiting other Jewish top athletes as well.

Katz's personal bests in the 3000 and 5000 metres, 8.35,8 and 15.04,2, were run in Berlin in 1926 and 1927, when he was already living in Germany. Amsterdam Olympic Games drawing ear, Katz once more came back to Finland for a training camp in early 1928. His plans were ruined by persistent pain in the foot, which had to be operated, thus crushing his dream of another Olympic challenge.



Elias Katz with his wife in the late 30's

Back to Berlin and gradually retiring from competition, Katz was working as a packer in a supermarket and coaching Bar-Kochba runners in the evenings. By 1930, there were some 5000 members in the club. At the same time, life in Germany was getting more and more oppressive. On January 30, 1933, Adolf Hitler was nominated the Chancellor of the Realm. The era of terror had started - especially for the Jews, very soon depriving them their jobs and all human worth.

Bar-Kochba was abolished, and all sports competition was barred from the Jews. Like thousands of others, Elias Katz also was drawing conclusions. Again he was leaving to another country, this time to Palestine.

Life destroyed by a bullet

Elias Katz having left the societies of Finnish sports most of his traces disappeared, which is why there is some confusion about his later fortunes. It is not true that Katz came back to Finland to fight against Russia in the Winter War. It is not true either that he was coaching athletes of soon-to-be-independent Israel for the upcoming 1948 London Olympic Games. What is true is the fact that no organization was able or willing to employ Katz in sports in Palestine. For many years, the Olympic champion was earning his bread in hard physical toil as a stonemason and construction worker. For some time he may have been the groundsman of Tel Aviv Stadium.

Nevertheless there were happy events in Elias Katz's life as well. In November 1936 in Jerusalem he became the husband of Finnish woman Dora Kamtsan (b. 1907 in Helsinki). Of Ukrainian descent, Dora also had left the country of her birth for greener pastures.

They had one child, daughter Ilana, born in February 1944. At the time, Elias Katz was working as a travelling film projectionist for the British troops which were guarding Palestine, a British mandate, up to the independence of Israel in May 1948. Tragically, Elias Katz never saw that day Isak Katz, son of Elias' cousin, living in Israel since 1955, has a vivid memory of the tragic news. "On December 27, 1947, I happened to be in a synagogue in Helsinki with my uncle, when in the midst of the divine service he was asked to the telephone. It was from daily paper *Helsingin*

Sanomat, the editor telling him that Elias Katz had been killed in a shooting incident."

It turned out that Katz had been fatally hit by a bullet of an Arab ambush sharpshooter near the British army camp of Tsrifimi in Gaza. According to Isak Katz, the date of death most probably was 26 December, not 24 as all the previous sources have told. "In spite of many warnings, Elias went to a dangerous region during the peak of Arab terror", Isak Katz tells. „That was how he met his fate.“

Elias Katz was buried in Rehovot, and his two Olympic medals can be found at Maccabi Club in Ramat Gan.

Daughter of an Olympic Champion

Where did this writer's interest in Elias Katz come from? Centenary birthday, strange lack of information, tragic end, great achievements of the happy 1920's.. There were personal reasons as well. At the time of Katz's death I was just a week or so old. What was the world like after WW II in the late 1940's?

After a depressingly slow start some of the knots finally began opening. It was most heart-warming to locate Elias Katz' daughter in Paramus, New Jersey, United States, first by letter and then by phone. This was the first time ever she was asked of her father by any sports researcher in Finland.

"There are no words to describe my emotions upon receiving your warm and lovely letter", Ilana Hed (nee Katz) told. "The adjectives that come to mind are excitement, delight, tremendous pride in my heritage mingled with sadness and anger for my great loss."

At the time of Elias Katz' death his only child was not yet four years old. Ilana no more has any personal memory of her father - just a collection of photographs, clippings and relatives' stories. "My mother never got over the tragedy. It was too painful for her to share her memories." After the catastrophe, Dora and Ilana came back to Finland for one and a half years, then moved again to Haifa, Israel. Dora Katz remarried in 1953 and lived to be almost 90.

Ilana Katz, an elementary school teacher, married Polish-born civil engineer Alex Hed in 1966. The following year they moved to New Jersey, where their only child Dan Hed was born in 1968. A lawyer, he is married to Esther Karasek.

For the last 28 years, Ilana Hed has been working as a Hebrew teacher at Temple Emeth, a reform congregation.

Valuable information also from Felix Simmenauer's book "Die Goldmedaille. Erinnerungen an die Bar-Kochba-Makkabi Turn- und Sportbewegung." Edition Heinrich. 1989.

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