

AFTER THE GLORY

by Ruud Paauw

About half of the Dutch ladies' gymnastics team which won the Olympic title in Amsterdam in 1928 consisted of girls of Jewish descent: Estella Agsteribbe, Helena Nordheim, Anna Polak, Elka de Levie, and Judikje Simons. Who had survived the war and who had not? Until a few months ago the Netherlands Olympic Committee, of which I am one of the archivists, had tried in vain to know their fate. We had turned a few times to the War Graves Foundation of the Dutch Government Institute for War Documents in Amsterdam, but could find no trace of them. The Foundation supposed they were all married after 1928 and without the married names of the girls it could not help us. The administration of all the Jewish female victims was grounded on German data and these did not mention their maiden names, but only their husband's names. Since the Jewish women had not played an important role in sports after 1928, we had lost sight of them and could not give the married names.

Thanks to an energetic Dutch engineer, living in the United States, 80-year-old Fred A. Lobatto of New York, who as a schoolboy saw the 1928 Games, we now know, sadly, what happened to the Jewish girls of the 1928 Dutch gymnastic team. Lobatto's daughter found a trace of the girls at the Mormon Genealogical Library in Salt Lake City. Then he followed the same path we did: the War Graves Foundation in Amsterdam and . . . he came at the right moment. After a work of many years the Dutch Society for Jewish Genealogy had just tracked down the maiden names of many thousands of married Jewish women. Now the fate of the gymnasts became known: **four of the five lost their lives in German concentration camps.**

1) Estella Agsteribe, later Estella Blits-Agsteribe, born 6 April 1909, deceased (murdered is a better word in all of the following) 17 September 1943 in Auschwitz, together with her 2-year-old son Alfred and 6-year-old daughter Nanny. Since they all died on the same date, shortly after deportation, they must have lost their lives in the gas chambers. Her husband, Samuel Blits, died on 28 April 1944 at Auschwitz.

2) Helena Nordheim, later Helena Kloot-Nordheim, born 1 August 1903, died 2 July 1943 at Sobibor, together with her husband Abraham and their 10-year-old daughter Rebecca. They were all killed in the gas chambers.

3) Anna Polak, later Anna Dresden-Polak, born 24 November 1906, died 23 July 1943 at Sobibor, together with her 6-year-old daughter, Eva. Her husband, Barend, died at Auschwitz, 30 November 1944.

4) Judikje Simons (an alternate who did not compete), later Judikje Themans-Simons, born 20 August 1904, died 3 March 1943 at Sobibor, together with her husband, Bernard, their 5-year-old daughter, Sonja, and their 3-year-old son, Leon.

5) Elka de Levie, later Elka Boas-de Levie, survived the war. How? - we do not know. Married to a man named Boas, they divorced in 1943. She died on 12 December 1979 without issue.

One of the two coaches of the Dutch gymnastic team in 1928 was the popular and enthusiastic Gerrit Kleerekoper, adored by all. Gerrit Kleerekoper, born 15 February 1897, died at Sobibor on 2 July 1943, together with his wife, Kaatje, and their 14-year-old daughter, Elisabeth. His 18-year-old son, Leendert, died at Auschwitz on 31 July 1944. So Kleerekoper and Helena Nordheim died on the same day and in the same camp.

As far as I know, two of the women from the glorious 1928 team are still alive. One of them is Ali van den Bos, who was coach of the Dutch Olympic team which finished 5th at the 1948 Olympic Games.