

JEWISH OLYMPIC CHAMPIONS VICTIMS OF THE HOLOCAUST *1)

BY DR. URIEL SIMRI

The fact that it pretended to value Olympism, especially prior to and during the Berlin Olympics of 1936, did not prevent the Nazi regime of Germany from killing every Jewish Olympic medalist it could lay its blood-stained hands on during World War II.

Among the Nazi victims were three Olympic pioneers, who gained Olympic glory already in the first modern games in Athens, back in 1896.

The gymnast Alfred Flatow from Germany, who gained three Olympic gold medals as well as one silver medal in Athens, was destined to perish in the concentration camp of Theresienstadt (Czechoslovakia), after having been declared “an enemy of the Reich”. His date of death has been registered as December 28, 1942 (Bernett, 1987: 94-102).

Alfred’s cousin, Gustav Felix Flatow, himself a winner of two Olympic gold medals in 1896 in Athens, died of starvation, also in Theresienstadt, on January 29, 1945.

As of 1987 the Deutsche Turnerbund (the German Federation for Gymnastics) hands out a memorial medal in honour of Alfred and Gustav Felix Flatow to an outstanding gymnast (Steins, 1987: 103-110). More recently the boulevard leading up to the Olympic stadium in Berlin has been renamed from “Reichssportfeld-allee” to “Alfred und Gustav Felix Flatow-Allee”. *2)

The German Philatelic Service has honoured the Flatow cousins by devoting the most expensive stamp in a series on Olympic champions to them.

The third Jewish athlete who gained glory at the Athens Olympics and later became a victim of the Holocaust was Otto Herschmann of Austria. Herschmann stands out not only because he won during his athletic career Olympic

medals in two different sports—in 1896 a third place in 100 metre freestyle swimming and in 1912 a silver medal as a member of the Austrian team for fencing with the sabre; a fact that has been achieved by very few athletes in the one-hundred years history of the modern Olympic Games, but also due to the fact that while competing in the 1912 Olympics at Stockholm, he served as chairman of a body that was equivalent to a National Olympic Committee.

Kamper claims that Dr. Herschmann, who perished in the concentration camp of Izbica, to which he was deported on June 14, 1942, a camp from which not a single person survived the Holocaust, was the only chairman of a NOC who gained an Olympic medal while in office (Kamper, 1982: 50-51).

The three Jewish Olympic medallists from Hungary who perished in the Holocaust were all fencers with the sabre. Dr. Oszkar Gerde gained gold medals in the team competition back in London 1908 and Stockholm 1912. Janos Garay won a gold medal in Amsterdam 1928, as well as a silver and a bronze medal in Paris 1924. Attila Petschauer gained a silver medal in Amsterdam 1928 and a gold medal in Los Angeles 1932. Both Gerde and Garay perished in the concentration camp of Mauthausen (Austria), while Petschauer could not be saved by the Soviet Army, which liberated his labor camp in the Ukraine, where he died soon after the liberation as an aftermath to his tortures. Both Garay and Petschauer also had two European championship titles to their credit (Szabo, 1993: 11-13).

Among the people who tortured Petschauer to death in the labor camp was, according to Siegman (1997: 76), a fellow participant in the Hungarian delegation to the 1928

Olympics, Kalman Cseh, who held the rank of colonel in the Hungarian army, an ally of Hitler at the time, and who knew Petschauer personally very well. Cseh's behaviour brings up the question whether the so-called "Olympic Family" enjoys nothing but a fictitious existence.

Three additional Olympic champions who perished in the Holocaust were identified only recently, due to the fact that the Nazis who kept very systematic registers did not bother to register the maiden names of their female victims.

Those three victims were Dutch female gymnasts who gained their gold medals in the team competitions at the Amsterdam Olympics of 1928.

Estella (Stella) Blits-Agsterribbe was murdered on September 17, 1943 in Auschwitz, together with her two children. Helena (Lea) Kloot-Nordheim was killed on July 2, 1943 at the camp in Sobibor and Anna (Ans) Dresden-Polak met the same fate in the same camp three weeks later on July 23, 1943. Both Nordheim and Polak were killed together with their husbands and children.

One of the coaches of the victorious Dutch team was a Jew - Gerrit Kleerekoper. Kleerekoper was killed at Sobibor, together with his wife and a daughter (a son of his was to die at Auschwitz), on the same day as his athlete Helena Kloot-Nordheim.

Judikje Themans-Simons, who was a substitute on the Dutch team, died on July 23, 1943 (the same day as Anna Polak) at Sobibor, together with her husband and two children (Wallechinsky, 1996: 506, with additional information supplied by Yad va-Shem, the memorial for the Holocaust in Jerusalem, and by Mr. P.H.Y. Mayer of London).

*1) The following is a modified version of a paper presented at the second seminar of the European Committee for the History of Sport in September 1997 at Katowice (Poland). It is reprinted with permission.

*2) The renaming occurred following an understandable opposition by the Christian-Democrat government party, which was overcome.

REFERENCES:

1. Bennett, H. (1987). "Alfred Flatow - von Olympiasieger

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2. Kamper, E. (1982). "Gestorben im Vernichtungslager Izbica", Olympisches Feuer, 2.: 50-51.

3. Siegman, J. (1997). Jewish Sports Legends. Washington: Brassey.

4. Simri, U. (1988). "Juden an der Wiege der Olympischen Spiele", SZGS, Vol. 1, 2.: 103-112.

5. Szabo, L. (1993). Jews in Hungarian Sports. Budapest: Museum of Physical Education and Sport.

6. Wallechinsky, D. (1996). The Complete Book of the Summer Olympics. Boston: Little Brown.

Note from the Editor: There is more to tell on this subject.

Already in the Winter 1994-issue of our Journal: CITIUS, ALTIUS FORTIUS, Vol. 2, No. 1., ISOH-member Ruud Paauw from the Netherlands published an article titled: AFTER THE GLORY, on the Dutch ladies' gymnasts who perished in the German concentration camps. Dr. Simri could not have known this article, because only recently he became a member. In his recent book: Olympische Sommerspiele - DIE CHRONIK I, Volker Kluge from Germany gave additional information about the two cousins Flatow, when reporting on them in the two notices numbers 69 and 70, on pages 39 and 40 from his book. It was Kluge himself, who discovered Gustav Felix Flatow's grave in Theresienstadt and reported its find to the still living son Stefan in Rotterdam, the Netherlands. Gustav Felix Flatow emigrated to the Netherlands immediately after the

Nazis took over the reigns in Germany in 1933. He was betrayed on Christmas-eve 1943, and then was transported via concentration camp Westerbork in Drenthe, the Netherlands, to Theresienstadt, where he died of starvation as mentioned by Dr. Simri.

(Dr. Simri was a major contributor to the exhaustive history of the Olympic Games, entitled "Olympic Gold," that was produced in 1995-96 by S.E.A. Multimedia of Tel Aviv on CD-ROM. Several other ISOH members also contributed. In fact, S.E.A. is indebted to Dr. Simri's contribution that helped "Olympic Gold" win many international awards.)
