At the 2007 ISHPES conference in Copenhagen a round table discussion was organized to discuss Hans Bonde’s *Gymnastics and Politics: Niels Bukh and Male Aesthetics*. The international panel members indicated that his book is not simply a publication with limited national interest, but one with broader international appeal. This is also due to the protagonist Niels Bukh (1880-1950), a physical educator who established Denmark’s first college of physical education—the Gymnastics High School in Ollerup—in 1920 and traveled with his gymnastic teams all over the world. Nils Bukh is not only an important figure in Danish sport history; during his many travels with his elite gymnasts he reached international fame and was able to spread Danish Gymnastics. In some countries, such as Japan, it is still practiced today. “Niels Bukh became reputedly the most internationally well-known Dane of the age” and “a face for Denmark both at home and abroad,” as Bonde writes (p. 11).

Hans Bonde uses a biographical approach to introduce Bukh to the readers as a national symbol, both in a positive and negative way. Bukh, a farmer’s son, revolutionized Ling’s men’s gymnastics with the aesthetic of the body as his central aspect. The core of his system was a “dual combination of strong muscular ‘masculinity’ and ‘feminine’ rhythm and elegance in movement” (p. 35). Thus Bukh’s gymnastics were seen as a rebellion against the “prevailing masculine role in gymnastics” (p. 13). Here Bonde discusses whether Bukh’s homosexuality might have had some influence on his aesthetic. Bukh’s gymnastics mainly concentrated on strengthening the farming population. He became famous for mass exercises and one of the more notable symbols of his gymnastics is the “six men on a vaulting box,” which became a trademark for the collective effort of Danish men. It showed
balance, control, and power (p. 37). Bukh’s teachings were not limited to men, and, in fact, there were often more female gymnasts enrolled. From 1914 until 1950, 6,000 female and 5,000 male students attended his school and were taught a kind of masculine gymnastics that expressed the male adolescent youth as the ideal, according to Bonde’s interpretations (p. 41).

Nils Bukh was a very complex personality. By the 1920s, he had contacts with German and Austrian groups that favored the “välkische concept” (pp. 16-17). Bukh later betrayed his country by collaborating with the Nazis, whose nationalistic ideas and anti-Semitism he admired. He not only had many friends among the Nazi party but also frequent exchanges with high military leaders and the German Reichssportführer Karl Von Tschammer and Osten. During the 1930s he organized displays of his gymnastic system in Germany, attended the Olympics in 1936 as a special guest of honor, and signed an exchange agreement with the Deutsche Hochschule für Leibeserziehung. The Reichssportführer was fascinated by Bukh’s gymnastic system, and it was eventually adopted as training in the SA, SS, and other organizations. This collaboration with the Nazis brought Bukh many enemies in his home country. At the end of the war he was investigated by the police and accused of political cooperation with the occupying power. Bukh was lucky as he was not severely punished and was able to rebuild his gymnastic school that first had been occupied by German troops and later by German refugees.

The book includes a multimedia DVD that presents about 130 of the many hundred film clips and photos that Bonde was able to find about Nils Bukh, his gymnastic schools, and the trips with his teams. It can be watched in Danish, English, or Japanese. Throughout the book the reader can find the appropriate marks that refer to certain film clips. For those who read the book and watch the DVD in parallel, the biography is presented in a very intense way.

For his research Bonde relied a great deal on newly located written material, such as official records of Bukh’s travels, newspaper articles, letters, photos, and film clips from various international archives. He also conducted interviews with former students of Bukh’s Physical Education School in Ollerup. From a German perspective, a few points can be criticized. For one, Bonde relies on secondary sources at times that leads to some inaccuracies. For instance the “little girl handing over a flower bouquet to Hitler” was not just any small girl, but Carl Diem’s daughter, a well-known fact in Germany. Diem was a leading figure in the development of German sports and the German Olympic movement in the first half of the twentieth century.

This very elaborate book, which is a shorter version of Bonde’s dissertation, is an important contribution to research on Danish sport history. Despite the minor critiques, it is an exciting book to read, especially for non-Danish people with their limited knowledge of Danish (sport) history during the first half of the twentieth century. The international readership at the ISHPES congress reveals that it was worth having the book translated into English, a practice that would be beneficial for many other non-English monographs.

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