

## *Flags incidents through Olympic History*

As the flag happens to be the symbol of a nation, it is always rather difficult to allude however lightly on such a topic. We intend, therefore to treat this subject entirely from the Olympic point of view, in the light of Baron de Coubertin who conceived and elaborated the Rule 56 of the Olympic Regulations, stipulating that 'Both in the Stadium and in its neighbourhood, the Olympic flag must be freely flown with *the flags of the participating nations.*' What was done in those days still is done today. It is, however, only right to mention that, from time to time, proposals have reached the International Olympic Committee to the effect of abolishing the hoisting of the flags of the participating nations and retaining only the Olympic Flag which is to be flown especially at the parade of the athletes which takes place at the Opening and Closing Ceremonies, as well as at all other ceremonials

pertaining to the protocol. This would have a salutary effect on excessive national pride and might certainly be a means to abolish this regrettable tendency to jingoism which has been pervading the Games and which is to be met at every turn on the occasion of all international sport manifestations.

I happened to witness a most deplorable incident when a contingent of athletes preceded by the flag of their country was hooted and booed by a small group of uneducated individuals driven by political passion. I am thankful to say that they represented a small minority while the majority of the public acclaimed these young athletes. This incident took place at the last Mediterranean Games. Let us now relate a few historical facts in connection with flags.

LONDON 1908. Already at that time complications arose just before the Opening of the Games of 1908. The problem concerning the British Commonwealth gave rise to a difference of opinions, the ultimate solution to the difficulty was that Australia, Canada and South-Africa took part in the Parade as autonomous States marching under their own colours.

On this same occasion, Baron de Coubertin wanted to make sure that Bavaria and Saxony were not asking for separate entries at these Games. General Count von der Assebourg, member of the International Olympic Committee for Germany, had to refer the matter to Kaiser Wilhelm II before he could reassure de Coubertin on that issue.

STOCKHOLM 1912. At those Games, the Russians insisted that the Finnish Delegation should parade behind the flag of Imperial Russia in spite of the fact that in view of the new Constitution dating from 1906, Finland was granted the right to have her own Parliament and to enjoy a certain autonomy. This historical fact took place in the reign of the Tsar Nikolas II. The Finnish athletes were within their legitimate rights when they protested and appealed to Baron de Coubertin who decided in their favour and ordered the Finnish athletes to parade under the colours of their own national flag. The Russians waived their claim in a very sportsman like manner. The Austrians showed themselves more intransigent in a matter concerning the flags, they requested that Hungarian, Czech and Austrian athletes must parade together under the same symbol and under the same country. The Hungarian Olympic Committee objected and declared that if the International Olympic Committee acceded to this request, the Hungarian delegation would withdraw from the Games. The Austrian Committee waived its claim but maintained it in the case of Bohemia. The International Olympic Committee settled the matter in the following manner: in case of a Finnish or Czech victory, a banderole to the colours of one or the other of these countries was to be placed above the Russian or Austrian flag!

SAINT-MORITZ 1928. At those Games Germany participated in the Olympic Games for the first time since the First World War, displaying the new flag of the German Republic. A few minutes before the parade at the Opening Ceremony of the Games, the General Secretary of the Swiss Olympic Committee Dr. Fr. M. Messerli, who led the ceremony, noticed that the flag of the German Republic had been changed and the Imperial flag (black-white-red) had been substituted in its place. With great firmness, he insisted that the Republic flag be restituted, proving thus how respectful he was of the protocol as well as anxious to carry out the instructions he received from the German Embassy in Berne. Ultimately, this flag was 'brought back' and

figured in the parade which commenced a few minutes late.

MELBOURNE 1956. All the flags belonging to the participating countries were kept in a particular store before the Games. They were taken out of this store as the contingents proceeded to arrive and hoisted on the mast of the Olympic Village where a brief ceremony of welcome had been organized in honour of each delegation. On the previous day, before the arrival of the Chinese contingent of Formosa (Peking was absent) an unknown Chinese approached the official whose duty was to keep the custody of the flags, and he was asked very politely to be allowed to see the Chinese flag which was to be flown at the Olympic Village on the following day. The official responsible granted him his request and showed the Chinese flag from Formosa, the visitor then pointed out that there was a mistake and that the other Chinese flag (that of Peking) should be flown, affirming that this flag was the symbol corresponding to the Chinese contingent which was to be present on the following day. Without further thought, the naive but honest official obeyed orders and thus the flag of Communist China welcomed the nationalists athletes... of Formosa! Joke or malice, the coup had been arranged by a journalist of the Democratic and Popular Republic of China as it transpired later.

SQUAW VALLEY AND ROME 1960. For sometimes past, the two Olympic Committees of Germany (East and West) have been arguing over the matter of which of the two flags will be heading their athletes' parade. The colours of the two flags are identical (black-red-gold). This flag was used at Cortina and Melbourne by the German delegation. But for the past few months, the Government of East Germany has added on the red band of its flag, an emblem representing a laurel or is it an oak? crown along with a hammer and a compass. The Olympic Committee of Western Germany objected and refused to allow its athletes to parade under this flag. On the otherhand, the Olympic Committee of East Germany also refuses to parade under the flag of Western Germany which bears no insignia. Thus an impasse is reached and we pass under silence the fierce polemics which were given a wide publicity in the press of these two territories, this led to the meeting of the two Olympic Committees in Berlin on November 18th 1959. In the meanwhile the problem was submitted to the Chancellery of the International Olympic Committee in Lausanne, its president Mr. Brundage eventually found a solution which was at least acceptable to both parties: he decided that with the view to 'neutralize' the German flag, that the original black red gold flag should bear a neutral insignia: that of the white Olympic rings to be shown on the red band of the said flag. This solution to the controversy was communicated at the last minute

to both Olympic Committees which happened to be holding a Conference in Berlin at the time, as we said before. Whereas West Germany accepted the solution without reserves, East Germany asked to postpone all decisions. A new debate on the matter is to take place at a Conference convened for December 12th 1959, it is to be held in Hannover. On November 23rd, a bombshell occurred, when the Bonn Government through the intermediary of its go-between, Mr. von Eckardt intervened and invited the Olympic Committee of West Germany to participate in the 1960 Olympics under the aegis of the flag of the Republic of Bonn, devoid of all symbolic characters, this restriction included the white Olympic rings. Mr. von Eckhardt maintains that this compromise, according to his way of thinking, was 'prejudicial to the dignity of the nation'. The president of the International Olympic Committee maintains his decision which is approved by the German Olympic Committee (West). The latter begged an audience with the Chancellor Adenauer intending to make him realize that his government ought not to intervene in Olympic affairs.

Simultaneously, the Olympic Committee of Democratic Germany (East) confirms its adherence to the Brundage's decision by sending a cable in duplicate to this effect to the Chancellery. The two German Olympic Committees have therefore agreed to adopt the flag black-red-gold superposed with the white Olympic rings showing on the red band of the said flag. This victory proves how the athletes of both zones of Germany have been brought together by the bonds created by Olympism.

The matter with the Bonn Government still remained to be settled. On November 25th 1959, Dr. Karl Ritter von Halt, president of the Olympic Committee of West Germany and his colleagues of the International Olympic Committee, Mr. Willi Daume, president of the German Sports Federation, were received in audience by the Chancellor Adenauer. The latter reiterated the 'Recommendation' made by his government for, he alleged, it would be a discredit to the German flag were it to be subjected to modification or addition of any kind of distinctive marks. The firm and uncompromising attitude of the Bonn Government has created a certain sensation among the German public opinion. The various political parties are discussing the problem, but we are of the opinion, that in conformity with Rule 25 of our Olympic Regulations, the Olympic Committees must be completely independent and autonomous as well as entirely removed from all political, religious or commercial influence. The attitude adopted by the German Olympic Committee which maintains its rights is precisely based on this Rule. A unified team (West and East Germany) will parade at Squaw Valley and Rome under the German flag with the surprint of the symbolical white Olym-

pic rings. With regard to the Hymn which is to be performed in the Olympic ceremonials in case of a German victory, it will be the *Ode to Joy* of the IXth Symphony of Beethoven.

This flag episode created quite a stir in Germany.

If we looked into it more thoroughly, we could multiply the narration of cases where flags have caused misunderstandings, national slights (legitimate in most cases), flags have even provoked most unpleasant political interferences. We recall the case of the well-meaning proprietor in Mexico who displayed the colours of the countries of the participating parties at the Session which the International Olympic Committee held in that city in 1953. The flags flown did not correspond in size, some being smaller, while others were not displayed in accordance to the regulations laid down by the protocol, while some flags were not there at all!

We also recollect the inextricable complications encountered by the organizers of the UNIVERSIAD (University Games) last Summer in Turin. The athletes of the Democratic Republic of China (Peking) were present, the flag of that country was flown along with those of the other participating countries. The flags were all put together and formed a happy and beautifully illuminated cluster at the Station Square. The Turin police, basing its objection on the fact that Italy did not entertain diplomatic relations with the Chinese Government of Peking, ordered the taking down of this flag. The reaction among the Chinese was immediate (we can easily sympathize and understand them), and they demanded the restitution of their flag to its place failing which they would withdraw from the Games. Solution to this incident: the Organizing Committee ordered the removal of ALL flags except that of Universiad. It came later to our knowledge, that the Italian Government made a posterior statement attesting that it had not interfered in any way in this dispute.

In conclusion, we reiterate our conviction that the display of national flags is fraught with danger wherever they are flown, and may give rise to some 'Diplomatic troubles'.

Organizers, be on your guard and beware!