

# Handing over of the Antique Stadium

*Thursday, June 22nd, 1961*

*Speech Professor Dr. Carl J. Burckhardt at the Sacred Grove*

The millennial silence of these ruins, the mystery of the sacred grove, and the brooding outlines of the serried hills, speak so great a speech that man's word seems all too feeble in their presence. Upon all that we here perceive there flows a happy light, such as our eye has never taken in elsewhere. This light lets all that is to be seen appear in strict precision, and yet it remains always tender; it imparts to every details its full meaning, and, at the same time, imparts to all a noble distance. As a poet expressed it 'Nothing is comparable to this light, unless it be the mind itself'. Nowhere are we so far as here from drifting dreams, for everything, even the furthest past, appears, 'truthfully'; and it is this truth which lifts up our hearts - it bears lasting witness to man's dignity.

In Olympia, mankind's place of remembrance, arose one of the great liturgies by means of which mortals held communion with the gods and at the same time with one another, in mutual respect and

in the sign of peace. We stand here at the source of solemn festival and heroic contest. Here was disclosed the deep meaning of the dignified procession which led to the throne of the highest God. Everything, which for us to-day has become Abstract Idea, was for the men of old Divine Presence. Men's hope, their sense of awe, their urge to worship once filled their world with ever-present shapes. We of to-day, who observe and take Nature apart, are seeking to be Masters of her powers. But the Greeks did not observe in our manner; no, they looked and discerned, and their discernment led them on other ways than ours. In this incomparable light arose the vision of their genius, whose marks are moderation, the rhythm of true proportions and a symphonic sense endued with the gift of harmony.

Game and contest and sporting achievement came under the law of this harmony. Victory won in the stadium belonged in the first place not to the

team from a country or a particular district or a particular city, nor to a group of men — no, not even to the victors themselves. It belonged to the great Beyond, to the ever-present divine spectators whom every competitor saw clearly before him, while the gods saw through him.

Every Greek was after his fashion a Lynkaeus, who could see through walls and knew what was going on in Olympus and Hades; at the same time he felt himself pierced through by the gaze of the gods as if by a bright arrow; but to these gods nothing human was strange. In the presence of these divine exemplars, in reverent wonder, and yet never without a freedom whose clear-sightedness bordered on irony, the men of that now distant day strove to reach the highest degree of self-perfection. In the epochs of their greatness there was no rift among them between man's body, his bearing, and his thought.

All the powers of body and mind had free play together here in Olympia. Here the pre-Socratics taught; Cheilon and Thales died here; here arose Archilochos' hymn to the glory of Herakles. Pindar and Euripides spoke their epinikia here. Herodotus read from his great report, and Thucydides reflected upon his work. Artists like Myron, Polygnot, Polyklet, Skopas or Praxiteles wrought their works in this valley. Miltiades was honoured here after the victory of Marathon. The helmet, which he gave as an oblation, was found here. Themistocles was greeted in this place as victor of Salamis. Here were preserved the trophies taken from the conquerors, and it is here that Alexander read his amnesty at the 114th Olympiad. The lists of names of Olympic victors were collected on this spot by Hippias and Aristotle, while the eternal Olympic flame burned in the Prytaneion.

From of old heroes who fell in battle were honoured by competitive games. For two thousand seven hundred years we have been reading in the *Iliad*, as though we were contemporaries and spectators, how Patroklos, the friend of Achille, was honoured in this splendid way. Here in Olympia was held high the memento of Pelops the son of Tantalus, who gave his name to the Peloponnese. But Pausanias tells us 'As for the Olympic Games, their origin goes back far beyond the beginnings of the human race, for we know that Kronos and Zeus measured themselves in this arena, and that the Curetes held their first race here'.

Myth always reaches ahead. How often it is the cause of historic event! In the last late afterglow of antique life, the Byzantine Stephanos was to write 'Myth is what never happened, but is for ever happening'.

Far above all the strife and brawling of the Hellenes, and revived ever and again by hopes, reigned the glorious concept of 'homonoia', of concord, of unity and reconciliation. Here reigned a peace which was the forerunner of the striving of our Middle Ages after the Peace of God — that Peace of God which for very brief moments seemed to come to pass. From the moral rule, the great games-rule of the Olympic Games, came a virtue which endured actively through all the collapses and declines — knightly conduct.

It was a knight of France who dared to re-awaken this ideal. I speak of Pierre de Coubertin; we

honour his memory! We know of his fight against trivial sneers, against the stubborn ambition of modern nations, against the evil of modern peak-performance, against lack of imagination and vanity. We know that his will and confidence won the day. We know of his many helpers, of whom we will mention only the outstanding Greek worker Bikelas. Yes, we know the help which Coubertin received from 1896 onward, and the final result — the resurrection of the Olympic Games as it was realized for the first time in Athens — what a glorious *Introitus!*

When the Olympic Committee under Bikelas, its first President, organized the first Olympiad, they avoided every romantic touch. They wanted to begin in a practical way, to serve contemporary sport and fill it with a new spirit. Nonetheless the art of the discus-throw sprang to life, and was soon to become an important athletic event. It was in Athens too that a particularly impressive occurrence was experienced. A Marathon-race had been put on the programme. The conditions had been criticized. People held them to be much too severe — the race was over a course more than 26 miles long. Well! at the appointed hour, in the presence of His Majesty the King and his two sons, there appeared as victor, and showing no sign of exhaustion, a powerful young Greek, a shepherd dressed in his 'fustanelle'. Quite on his own he had glorified the victory of Marathon of the year 490 B.C. over again.

Since those days in Athens the Olympic Games have been preserved for us despite the catastrophes which have befallen our contemporaries in the course of the 20th century. Last year in Rome one could see what a universal character they have acquired. May they guard the Olympic spirit, the knightly spirit, the fair spirit of ordered play together, as a torn world's hope of concord on a higher plane.

There is another sphere, above all fratricidal wars, in which a noble spirit of fraternal rivalry has prevailed. That is the sphere of archaeological science and its bold pioneering representatives. From the eighteenth century up to our days the Greeks and representatives of great nations have been daring the magnificent adventure of bringing to light the past. Frenchmen, Englishmen, Germans and Americans have completed with the generous help of Greece their wonderful achievement. Within this achievement the history of the excavations at Olympia has an honourable place.

That so many scholars from all civilized countries have been able to work together in Greece from the 18th century up to the latest times has been due, since the Greek Wars of Freedom, to the liberality of the Greek State and the continuous collaboration of expert Greek colleagues. Right up to our days the French were working in Delphi and Delos, the English in Knossos and Mycenae, the Italians in Phaistos, and the Americans in Corinth and in the Agora of Athens. Here in Olympia the common effort of men, swept along by the joy of discovery, has been especially impressive. Since 1723, from Bernard de Montfaucon through Winkelmann to Richard Chandler, Fauvel, Leake, Dodwell and Cell, Cockerell, Lord Stanhope, Quatremere de Quincy, Allason and so many others, the chain of great achievement is unbroken. Among the band

of meritorious men we may especially name three initiators – Ernst Curtius, Georg Treu, and Wilhelm Dörpfeld. They all laid the foundations on which we still build to-day. Archaeological science has grasped what was hidden the ground, and perceived countless traces left behind by vanished cultures. Emil Kunze, the Director of the German Archaeological institute in Athens, has now found – in the middle of deep excavations penetrating to the last levels – a direct connection with the Olympiads. Thanks to the work led by him, and thanks to the generous gift made by the President of the German Olympic Association, the excavation of the stadium has been possible. It can be shown to-day in the condition in which it existed in the 4th century. Professor Kunze will give us an expert report on this and other related happenings in the archaeological effort.

In our present state, verging on ultimate perils, may this stadium with its simple restraint help the youth of to-day to grasp Coubertin's thought entire. This thought includes the challenge to renunciation, to wise restraint, to the observance of just rules in sign of respect for a leading Principle set above us. Only in this sign can we win, beyond all the contradictions which divide us, our common humanity and with it the peace for which we all yearn.

We are not heirs who mourn for lost ideals. We are ready to earn ourselves in daily endeavour whatever serves to free us from want and danger. We have lost the harmony of the men of old;

let us find new harmonies again — our own. If we stay creative a new spring will break forth.

The people of present-day Greece, who are receiving us so hospitably, have given us great examples time and again. For more than a hundred years they have been staking their lives incessantly for freedom, and have heroically withstood the blows of fate.

May I, in conclusion, recall a distant personal memory? In 1923, when, in the service of the International Red Cross in Anatolia, I lived through the terrible episode of the flood of Asia Minor Greeks back to Hellas, I saw in boundless grief only want and misery ahead. But what in the beginning had the effect of a catastrophe, in the end transformed itself into new strength. A great people renewed itself through unity; mighty and constructive possibilities appeared, and the welding together of all the Greeks was the pre-condition for their wonderful powers of resistance in the last war.

May the present day, may the high place which unites us, so strengthen the will of those who are growing up and who, to-morrow, will bear the responsibility, that they may withstand the ceaseless forward pressure of chaos: stern and composed, as the Olympic Rule requires; incorruptible as the spirit of true, of free research shows, and ever with the aim of reconciliation in community. With this wish to the young torch-bearers striding towards an unknown future I should like to close.

*Carl J. Burckhardt.*