

XVI*

The four war years

The war which had flared up between Germany, Britain, the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Belgium, France, Russia and Serbia created a state of affairs which could have threatened the very existence of the Olympic institution and whose first effect had been to put an end to any intentions on the part of its President to retire.

It had in fact been my wish to give up the functions I had been exercising de facto for twenty years and, although no decision had been reached, I had discussed the possibility with several of my colleagues. In the present circumstances however it was quite out of the question for me to retire before the end of my ten-year period of office in 1917. A captain does not leave the bridge of his ship during a storm.

Two problems immediately arose, one concerning the next Games and the other the actual composition of the IOC.

Regarding the first point, barely two weeks had passed since the invasion of Belgium when I received proposals for “transferring” the Games—at first somewhat vague plans but soon made more precise by a favourable move on the part of Sullivan, who had been one of the pillars of the recent Congress and whose loyalty now proved unshakeable. He asked for “instructions”. We could not hesitate. *An Olympiad may fail to be celebrated ; its number remains.* This is the ancient tradition. The Germans, who at that time believed in a rapid war and a sure victory, did not ask to be relieved of the Olympic mandate. To make a move in favour of the United States or Scandinavia would have been to take a step whose outcome would have been difficult to foresee and to risk subsequent cracks in Olympic unity, without any advantage for anyone. I therefore rejected any kind of action of this sort.

The question of the composition of the Committee would not have come up if British public opinion, which for the first time showed itself lacking in moderation and level-headedness, had not pressed certain international academic or scientific associations to expel their German members. Neither France, Belgium nor Russia seemed prepared to do this. Here too, such action would have been tantamount to sowing bad grain in unknown soil. The situation could have been embarrassing if there had been a German or an Austrian on the Board of the IOC, but fortunately this was not the case. The Board could therefore continue as it was and merely suspend its sessions. Later on, we would see how things turned out. To anticipate the future with hasty decisions would only have made matters worse. With the

* See “Olympic Review” since No. 101-102.

approval of my Belgian and French colleagues, I therefore rejected the demand of Mr. Thomas A. Cook, who then handed in his resignation.

Once these two points had been settled, two more arose concerning which, on the other hand, I considered that prompt action was called for. It was not very clear where the headquarters of the IOC were actually located. Some thought they were in Paris because that was where I had my principal residence at that time. But in those days we followed a custom dating back to the very beginning of the modern Games, according to which the registered office was transferred every four years to the country where the next Olympiad was to be held : a privilege which was very seldom claimed but which could in fact be claimed by Berlin if it wished. Consequently, in the present state of Europe, administrative stability had become indispensable to Olympism.

We had already spoken of the matter at the IOC and my colleagues had not seemed very enthusiastic about my intentions. In view of the seriousness of the circumstances I decided, after informing those who were still accessible, to override the objections and, on 10th April 1915 in the Assembly Room of the Lausanne Town Hall, we signed the document establishing Lausanne as the world administrative centre and the repository of the archives of modern Olympism. Mr. de Blonay, the member in Switzerland, accompanied me. The Mayor, Mr. Maillefer, and the members of the Town Council received the document on behalf of the town. The State Council of the Canton of Vaud was also a party to this important act in which Mr. Motta, then as today President of the Confederation, took part by sending an encouraging telegram from the Federal Council.

My second move concerned the future celebration of the Games of the 7th Olympiad (1920). The IOC Session that had been held in Paris in June 1914 had already been called on to examine the matter. Budapest and Antwerp had both applied to stage the Games. Antwerp had been represented by a delegation which had presented us with an eloquent address magnificently printed and bound. It had been too soon then to make a decision. A sort of preliminary ballot had divided the votes almost equally, although with a slight advance for Budapest.

Meanwhile, in the month of October 1914, when the mission which had been entrusted to me by the French Government, as soon as it had moved to Bordeaux, caused me to travel all over France, I had passed through Lyons on several occasions. There, Mr. Herriot had shown me the magnificent stadium he had started to construct. Consulted by him as to the opportuneness of a candidature on the part of Lyons for 1920 or 1924, I had been careful not to discourage him. During the following year I arranged the signing of an important document in which Lyons, while applying to stage the Games of the 7th Olympiad (1920), stated that it agreed to withdraw its application in favour of Antwerp, should the latter maintain its application for that date, and to postpone its own candidature till 1924. The document was signed by the Mayor of Lyons and, for Belgium, by the Comte d'Assche. Shortly afterwards, an eloquent letter from the Comte de Baillet-Latour confirmed the agreement on behalf of the Belgian Olympic Committee. Thus, just as I was determined to prevent any transfer for 1916, I felt

equally strongly that it was preferable to pave the way for 1920, and even for 1924, on different soils. That is why, not content with considering Antwerp and Lyons, I listened a little later to proposals emanating from America.

But not from the United States ; Sullivan had just died suddenly : astounding offers nevertheless continued to be made. The prestige of the IOC had been enhanced over there by an *International Olympic Committee Day*, set aside by the San Francisco Exhibition to do it special honour. American exhibitions have the custom of dedicating special days in this way to countries or institutions. One of the organisers, who was in Stockholm in 1912, had been very much struck by Olympism there. The modern pentathlon in particular had roused his enthusiasm. It being impossible to celebrate the Olympic Games in San Francisco in 1915, he had nevertheless asked the IOC at least to patronise a pentathlon event. Our colleague Allison Armour had been delegated to represent us. On 18th March 1915, therefore, the Olympic flag had flown over the exhibition and, in the main courtyard, a grandiloquent speech had been made by the President of the exhibition, accompanied by an exchange of medals.

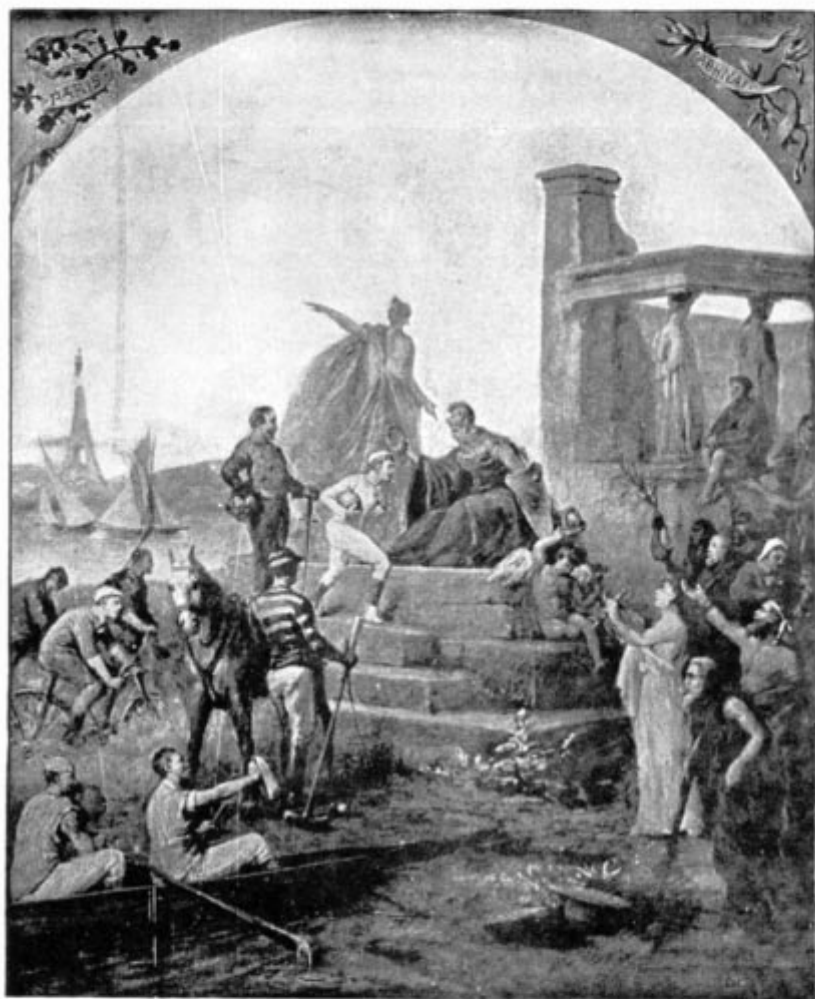
Shortly afterwards, Cuba entered upon the scene. By now we had grown accustomed to the idea of the 6th Olympiad coming and going without being celebrated but continuing to count on the list, as in ancient times. It was on the year 1920 that all aspirations were focused. Atlanta, Cleveland and Philadelphia had all three promised the earth. The committee that had been set up in Havana was less lavish in its promises, more aware of the difficulties, but at the same time assured of the support of the government, including the head of the Republic, President Menocal.

Whether the project would later succeed or be withdrawn, it nevertheless helped us to conquer South America, for which the propaganda departments with which I was then associated gave me invaluable help. In this part of the world, we had had many disappointments : a series of Argentinian members who had been of no help at all, and either complete lack of understanding or attempts at independence that were carried to the extreme and were exceedingly annoying for us. At one point, the Chilean clubs had made life very difficult for our colleague, Professor Garcia, even though he had been elected on the recommendation of their government, and the least I can say of the Chilean military delegation to the Games in Stockholm is that it acted very incorrectly towards the IOC ; after that, an attempt had been made in Buenos Aires to hold an independent "Olympiad".

In Brazil sport was slow in developing, but in Mr. de Rio Branco, a former football captain, and now Minister in Berne, we had a reliable and devoted colleague. In 1916, I was able to set up in Paris an interim Committee, whose kingpin was Mr. de Matheu, Consul General of Salvador, and which thanks to him carried out the most active propaganda. An illustrated brochure entitled "Que es el olimpismo ?" was widely distributed in South American countries, superimposing its action on that of the Spanish Committee, into which the

Cover of the last issue of "Olympic Review" before World War I. ►

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enthusiasm and generosity of the Marquis de Villamejor had breathed new life. Madrid too, where in 1916 I had an opportunity of presiding over a meeting of this Committee, produced excellent propaganda in the form of a booklet on Olympism.

The tremendous homage paid to the IOC in San Francisco had even more direct repercussions in the Philippines where the Americans, from the beginning of their occupation, had taken pains to encourage sport. Before the war even, I had got in touch with the Far Eastern Athletic Association, whose headquarters were in Manila, and whose President in 1915 was Doctor Wu Ting Fang of Shanghai, aided by excellent American advisers. With the enlightened backing of YMCA officials, they did some remarkable work and, now that the prestige of the IOC had reached their shores, showed themselves quite eager to place their "Far Eastern Games" under its wing. They felt called on to regenerate China, Japan and Siam and took delight in adding the population figures. Without agreeing entirely with the strict mathematical accuracy of the American estimates for the future, we were nevertheless ready to trust them. "They had", they wrote to me, "created an *Olympic Kindergarten*". This was encouraging. What we lost on one side, we therefore recuperated on the other and I had been right when I wrote in one of the last numbers of the *Olympic Review* that if the war were one day to prevent an Olympiad from being celebrated in Europe, the following would be staged there, and that if the youth of this continent were temporarily forced to relinquish the Olympic flame, there would be another youth on the other side of the world ready to take over.

The Olympic Review was one of the first victims of the holocaust. Its last number had appeared in July 1914. It was impossible to continue it. In actual fact, I had already decided to discontinue it after December and my colleagues had been invited by me to replace it with a bulletin of a more technical nature in three languages. I considered, on the eve of the recent cataclysm, that it had completed its mission and I wished to have more time for my own historical research. But from July to December it would publish and explain the documents and minutes of the Congress. Fate decided otherwise. It was printed at Ghent and in the upheavals of war many of the collections placed on one side were destroyed.

During the war several members died : Count Brunetta d'Usseaux, Baron de Venningen, killed on the front during the first weeks, and Evert Wendell. In addition, the place vacated by Mr. A. Ballif, who had resigned, was taken by the Marquis de Polignac. In 1918, shortly before the Armistice, three new members were elected from North and South America, Messrs. Bartow Weeks, Dorn y de Alsua and P.J. de Matheu. Finally, in 1917, my own mandate had expired and been renewed through the intermediary of Mr. de Blonay, who had been kind enough, as from 1st January 1916, to agree to take over my official functions for me, which were very much reduced anyway owing to the fact that neither a plenary nor a partial meeting could be held until peace was signed. At least everything was kept going ready for the day we could start again.

(to be continued)