

## Pierre de Coubertin and his family



*Pierre de Coubertin, in 1913, in front of the chateau de Mirville (France) accompanied by Geoffroy de Navacelle, his sister, the Countess de Madre, and Maurice de Madre.*



*by Pierre Chavan*

*A personal reminiscence*

There are very few people left now who knew Baron Pierre de Coubertin personally, who talked with him, and can still speak of these experiences today.

Even fewer still are those who came close to members of his family and knew of the problems he had to face at home.

So I have decided to write about this in order to contribute to a deeper knowledge of the founder of the modern Olympic Games, and of some of the circumstances in which he found himself.

In 1921, while I was a student in the Faculty of Law at Lausanne University, Pierre de Coubertin, who was then almost 60 years of age, came regularly during his visits to Lausanne to see my father, who was a professor of Theology at our University, and had been appointed Rector there at the end of

the 1914-18 War. Pierre de Coubertin was at this time engaged in tireless pursuit of his aim to move the nerve centre of his work to Lausanne. He was anxious to expound this project to members of the Cantonal and Communal authorities, such as Paul Perret, a senior member of the Council of State, the Syndic (Mayor), Mr. Arthur Freymond, as well as various people involved in third level education such 'as the philosopher Arnold Reymond, the theologian Philippe Bridel, and my father. The unflagging devotion to the Olympic cause shown by Dr Francis Messerli (whose work was carried on by Dr Paul Martin, the ex-Olympic champion, who is well known in Lausanne) should also be mentioned here.

I retain a very clear memory of the periodic visits made by Pierre de Coubertin to our house. I can still see his slender outline, his face distinguished by the big moustache which masked a determined mouth. I shall never forget his keen eye, direct and penetrating in its gaze. I can still hear his voice, with its metallic timbre and elegant diction ; a sharp, incisive voice, imbued with great charm. Pierre de Coubertin « pleaded » the cause of Olympism with such effectiveness that he was able to realize his plans and the municipality of Lausanne put the house known as « Mon Repos » partly at his disposal.

It was there, on the third floor of this lovely residence (which had been that of the Perdonnet family) that I was later to meet Pierre de Coubertin quite frequently during the years 1930 to 1935. My father died in 1927, but I

kept in touch with his faithful visitor. I had by then completed my law studies, qualified as a solicitor, and in 1932, entered the Public Ministry of the Canton.

Pierre de Coubertin honoured me with his confidence and his friendship. He confided his worries to me, most particularly about what would happen to his wife and his daughter, Renée, after his death. The following lines, taken from a letter which he wrote to me from La Croix, in the Var district of France, dated 10th December 1932, are an indication of his state of mind : *«... recently my time has been taken up in organizing things in case my wife should find herself alone and in difficult circumstances. She may need support and advice. So it is that I have turned to my dear friends Messrs. Perret, Freymond and Reymond in my Will, which has just been re-written, and I have added your name, «in memory of your father», asking you to take his place. Of course it is simply a matter of material interests and hardly constitutes a responsibility. The rest has been taken care of as best I can.»*

These worries were well founded. Since leaving the Rue Oudinot in Paris, the de Coubertin family had led a rather wandering existence. Depending on the season, and health problems, they moved from the Midi in France (particularly the Cote d'Azur) to Switzerland, where they stayed mainly in Lausanne, at the Hotel Beau Sejour (which now houses the Communal and Cantonal Administration). This way of life was determined on the one hand by the unsettled character of the Baroness, and, unfortunately, for many years by the health of their daughter Renee, born on 22nd May 1902, who suffered from psychiatric problems which necessitated periodic hospitalization. It was mainly on the subject of this illness that Pierre de Coubertin came to see me, because he felt that the time would come when she would have to be placed under the authority of a guardian or trustee, and he was thinking of giving me this responsibility.

Renee's parents took great care to ensure that her lively interest in literature and philosophy could be developed and gratified. On 5th November 1923, Renee de Coubertin had been awarded the 11 Bachelier 11 diploma (the equivalent of «A» levels) with a distinction in Latin, Modern Languages, and Philosophy. From then on, whenever her state of health permitted, she continued to complete her literary education by reading, often with lists prepared by her father.

Renée de Coubertin had a talent for writing and produced various essays which were

considered good enough for publication. Amongst these were «Esquisses antiques» (Antique sketches) and, in particular, a powerful study entitled «Aperçu de l'évolution de l'architecture espagnole depuis les origines jusqu'au regne de Philippe II» (A general survey of the evolution of Spanish architecture from its origins to the reign of Philip II) (61 pages) printed by Paul Roubaud at Aix en Provence.

She also began a novel, which was never finished.

Those periods in which Renée de Coubertin was in full possession of her intellectual faculties were followed, sadly, by long months of mental confusion and irrationality. The depressions required treatments which were as painful for the patient as for her parents.

It is easy to see how this tragedy must have overshadowed the life of a family already burdened by the almost total infirmity of a son, Jacques, who died in Lausanne in June 1952 at the age of 56.

These then, in brief, were the tragic family circumstances which de Coubertin had to face daily. They bring to light all the more remarkably the exceptional strength of character which sustained him in his untiring pursuit of his Olympic goal. Although he had relinquished the presidency of the International Olympic Committee to Count Henri de Baillet-Latour in 1925, he continued to watch over the organization of various Olympic occasions. I saw this for myself whenever I visited him at "Mon Repos", where he worked in a little office beside the secretariat, which at that time was run with unceasing devotion and remarkable competence by Madame Zanchi, with the help of one or two volunteers.

Our conversations focussed mainly on the future of the members of his family, whose state of health remained a constant source of concern. He also spoke to me of the conclusions he had drawn from his meetings with Heads of State and Ministers in the European countries which he visited. His disquiet was all too justifiable. On October 29th, 1933, he wrote to me from Geneva : *"The impressions which I have brought back from Paris do nothing, a/as, to ease those which the session at the League of Nations has left me with. "Quem vult Jupiter perdere, dementat", was never more true. One by one the issues are silting up, and in my opinion the genera/ motto is "Too /ate, too /ate for Society today, and its form of civilization"; possibilities and the dimming of a future destined for other forms. "*

Despite everything, Pierre de Coubertin remained confident in the future of Europe. Preparations were being made for the summer Games, which were due to take place in Berlin in August 1936, preceeded by the winter Games at Garmisch-Partenkirchen. The Olympic flame would once again blaze in all its glory and, he hoped, would appear as a symbol of the rallying of the peoples of the world, already foreshown by the five interlaced rings of the Olympic emblem. This emblem, it should be remembered, in a way sums up Pierre de Coubertin's thinking on the fundamental principles of Olympism : *"To fire the imagination of the young, both through physical effort, and those moral qualities which are the basis of amateur sport, and also to bring together all the athletes of the world in a quadrennial competition, which is both friendly and impartial. and so contribute to the respect and maintenance of peace between peoples."*

The regulation Olympic emblem is that which conforms to the model created by Pierre de Coubertin and presented by him to the Olympic Congress at Paris in 1914.

These meetings with Pierre de Coubertin in the years 1932 to 1937 have been invaluable to me in carrying out the task which he set out for me in the provisions of his Will.

The task of advising the Baroness de Coubertin and her daughter began for me on 2nd September 1937. when Pierre de Coubertin died suddenly at the age of 75. Later, from 1947 until February 1968, I became trustee, and then guardian of Renée de Coubertin, when this measure became necessary for the safety of both the material and the personal interests of this family.

On 15th April 1947, the justice of the peace on the Lausanne circuit named me legal guardian of Renée Marie Marcelle de Coubertin, then aged 45 years. The mother of my ward was then 86. Since the death of her husband she had looked after her daughter both while she was mentally disturbed and during the periods of remission. But eventually the task became too much for her. She then requested me, in accordance with the directions left by Pierre de Coubertin. to initiate proceedings to have her daughter taken into the care of a guardian. In order to preserve Renée's great sensitivity to any restrictions on her liberty, a simple trusteeship was set up first of all. It was soon necessary to change this into a guardianship.

I was constantly in touch with the Baroness de Coubertin and her daughter. Solutions had to

be found to financial problems, and the frequent changes in the state of my ward's health had to be faced up to.

As far as finances were concerned, means had to be found for two people, one already very elderly and the other requiring medical care which was often quite expensive, to enable them to continue to wander between France and Switzerland with the minimum of difficulty.



*Pierre de Coubertin with his wife and daughter.*

Mention must be made here of the considerable financial contribution to Olympic work made by both the Baron and the Baroness de Coubertin. On his death, Pierre de Coubertin left only a miserable amount of what had once been a fortune. On her side, the Baroness paid out of her own pocket for the realization of her husband's projects. She was the only child of a French diplomat, Gustave Rothan, who was Minister Plenipotentiary towards the middle of the last century. A passionate art lover and collector, Mr. Rothan assembled a collection of pictures of the Flemish, Italian and French schools particularly, which grew to be very large and was described by art critics of repute.

Baroness de Coubertin inherited considerable wealth from her father, consisting mainly of furniture, pictures and various objets d'art acquired during the diplomatic posts held by

her father in various European countries. So it was that when the City of Lausanne welcomed the IOC to "Mon Repos", the apartments of this large residence could for the most part be furnished and decorated with items provided by the Baron and Baroness. Anything which could not be put on exhibition was put into store either at "Mon Repos" or in the Lausanne banks. Renee's guardian had to check on the state of conservation of this patrimony from time to time and although assisted by her mother and members of her circle this was no easy task for she herself attributed great value to the property and in her eyes it constituted a financial reserve destined to be used in case of need.

This need arose and various sales were organized either in the USA or Europe, particularly at Cologne, Berne and Lausanne. Many antique dealers and gallery owners will perhaps still remember the sometimes difficult dealings which preceded these exhibition-sales.

The Communal authorities who had responsibility for "Mon Repos" moved with much tact and benevolence towards the de Coubertin family, doing everything possible to give them back the use of the furniture and various objects which had been intended for sale. A modest part of what had originally been given on loan to the Commune of Lausanne was later handed over to it.

Despite her exceptional vitality, Baroness de Coubertin, aware of the need to create a permanent home for her daughter, where she would feel more at ease than in a boarding house or an hotel (when she was not in a nursing home !) accepted the suggestion put forward by doctors and friends that a villa be purchased where she could live with her daughter. My ward's mother was then 93 years old and the liveliness of her intellect was still remarkable.

A villa was found in the Commune of Montreux in a place called "Au Cret", behind the Chateau de Chatelard. It was a small, modest house, well built, and relatively isolated in the countryside.

The acquisition of this villa in the name of my ward was agreed by the board of guardians and the purchase took place in 1954. Mother and daughter lived here in relative peace, although it was often difficult to find household help, in view of the solitude of this house, and its distance from a shopping centre.

Here the Baroness passed the last years of her life. Here too she attained her one

hundredth year, which was marked by a very touching ceremony at the Montreux Palace organized by the Communal and Cantonal authorities. and by the IOC. Having refused the traditional armchair offered by the Council of State of the Canton of Vaud (she would have considered such a gift offensive, such was her energy and strength), she was presented with a recording of her husband's voice, taken from the sound archives of the Radio de la Suisse Romande, which she accepted with great emotion. This record, and the gramophone which was obviously necessary to play it (the Baroness de Coubertin did not possess one !) were handed over to the centenarian who, in a firm voice, and with great elegance, thanked each one of the dignitaries who offered her gifts and good wishes. She stood up to speak, leaning lightly on her stick, and recalled with astonishing precision and clarity her memories of the years she had worked with her husband for the-realization of his Olympic work, with all the difficulties this had involved, particularly in France. This anniversary celebration remains a moving memory for all those privileged to attend it.

Another two years were to pass before her strength was suddenly diminished and the Baroness de Coubertin-had to enter a nursing home near Lausanne where, on 6th May 1963, she died peacefully. Her funeral was held in the Cathedral of Lausanne.

These are the circumstances of this family in which I was involved. Pierre de Coubertin was a fighter in every sense, in the promotion of Olympism, as in facing up to a difficult and often painful family life. Without ever forgetting for one moment the welfare of those dear to him, he continued to carry on the task to which he had dedicated his life.

This honorary citizen of Lausanne lies in the Cemetery of Bois de Vaux, and there he was joined first by his son, then his wife, and finally, his dear daughter, Renée.

P. C.

