

## **ARTUR TAKAC, THE STADIUM AS A FIELD OF EXPERIENCE**

*by MARIE-HÉLÈNE ROUKHADZÉ*

After exploring the beginnings of Olympic administration through the memories of Mrs. Lydie Zanchi (OR No 228), Marie-Helene Roukhadzé now introduces Mr. Artur Takac, IOC Adviser for the preparation of the Olympic Games. Recalling his various posts within the European and, afterwards, the international sports scene, Mr. Takac relives some of the great encounters, for instance his meetings with American champion Jesse Owens and Dr. Francis Messerli, which marked his life and determined the direction of his career. The account of this witness adds to our understanding of the way Coubertin's heritage has been handed down.

**T**hat winter in Varazdin, a delightful baroque town in north-western Yugoslavia, it was very cold, which was nothing unusual. At the edge of the skating rink, a young woman was attaching a pair of skates to the feet of her little boy. Mrs. Takac, herself an excellent skater, thought it perfectly natural to introduce her four children in turn to the pleasure of mastering a sport. She was an enthusiast and her children were to take after her.

As he slid clumsily on the ice, Artur was far from imagining that sport would occupy his whole life, that it would be his joy and his salvation. The adventure was beginning.

Wrapped up warmly in the big sweater knitted by his mother, the child kept trying without losing heart. This perseverance was to take him into four other sports, track and field, football, tennis and ice hockey, at national, then at international level.

One autumn day in 1934, an athletics meeting between the cities of Zagreb and Varazdin was organised in the latter. Artur Takac was sixteen years old and was very moved to have been selected for his club's football team. He played his best and left the field out of breath and

proud. While he was resting in the changing rooms with his team-mates, the athletics trainer came in, somewhat exasperated, and said to him : "Young man, I know you are tired, but your friend is ill and can not participate in the 1500 m. Take his place. Go quickly, the race starts in a few minutes." As if it were the simplest thing in the world, the adolescent was at the line when the race began. His victory earned him a place in the national athletics team. Artur was emerging into high-level sport. That same year, he became national junior champion over 800 m and 1500 m ; the following year, he won the junior doubles tennis championship. He was endowed with an irrepressible enthusiasm which saved him from doubt. He liked to play, to organise and to share.

What young athlete does not dream of shaking hands and speaking with a great champion? For Artur, this dream began in 1936 and still lives on. His first contact with an idol of the stadium took place thanks to John Lovelock, the New Zealander, Olympic 1500 m champion at the Games of the XIth Olympiad in Berlin, whom he met in 1935 at an athletics meeting between the university team of Great Britain and the Yugoslavian national team. Artur took part in the youth

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camp. Imagine his delight when John Lovelock took him to the Olympic Village and introduced him to Jesse Owens, four times gold medallist in the 100 and 200 m, 4 x 100 relay and long jump !

From the moment he was back in Varazdin, the young athlete-thought of nothing but the next Games. He resumed his training in several sports, founded an ice-hockey team which he captained at the Croatian championships and took to second place in the national rankings. Sadly, the second world war broke out. Many young men were killed and others taken to Italy as prisoners. Artur Takac was fortunate enough to survive, and, when Mussolini fell in 1943, he was liberated together with other Yugoslav, Polish, English, American, Greek and French prisoners. As the German army advanced, some of them were turned back into Switzerland, where they were able to stay with the status of escaped prisoners of war.

At that time, there existed in Lausanne the Olympic Institute and the International Bureau of Sports Pedagogy, founded by Baron Pierre de

Coubertin and directed by Dr. Francis Messerli, a good man, deeply imbued with the Olympic spirit. With the support of the Swiss Red Cross, he organised sports instructors' courses for the prisoners. Each camp sent ten young athletes to Lausanne, where, for two months, theoretical courses in the afternoon followed physical training on the beach at Vidy. Francis Messerli noticed the talent of Artur Takac and offered him a position of his assistant, taking him definitively out of the prisoners' internment camp.

As well as looking after those young people, who were in a poor state of health, Dr. Messerli was preparing for the fiftieth anniversary celebrations of the IOC, organised by the Swiss Olympic Committee on 17th and 18th June 1944, a Congress on sports pedagogy and psychology, to be held on 16th and 19th June. At that time, Artur Takac was 26 years old, and he was invited to give a lecture on the pedagogy of athletics training.

Seconded by Paul Martin, R. William Jones, later to become President of the International Basketball Federation, Lieutenant Tomas and



*Pupils around the teacher. Artur Takac on the left, in white shorts. The course took place from 27th July to 31st August, 1944, at Ouchy.*

Artur Takac, Dr. Messerli organised in the context of the Congress mini-Olympic Games for the escaped prisoners of war, to help them understand and experience the Olympic spirit of which he often spoke to them. American, English, Yugoslav, Greek, Italian and French teams met on



*Passing on the olympic spirit : Coubertin and Messerli.*

the field each morning, hoisted the Olympic flag and sang their national anthems. They then took part in track-and-field, boxing, basketball, volleyball, swimming and water-polo competitions.

After two months of courses, Artur Takac had found his athletic form once more and left to join the army of liberation.

The experience of the war, of suffering and hatred, but also of generosity, had marked Artur Takac. Although circumstances had prevented him from pursuing his career as an athlete, they had given him the opportunity to live for a time at the heart of Olympism and to meet generous men like Dr. Messerli who were trying to find ways to help young people, disorientated, abandoned and disorganised after the war.

In 1945, Artur Takac returned to Yugoslavia to take part in the general reconstruction, devoting himself to that of sport, with which he was familiar. He became Secretary General of the Yugoslavian athletics federation and founded a large sports club in Belgrade called the Partisans which covered twenty-one sports and has since become one of Europe's biggest sports associations. With other trainers, he tried to develop sports activities and prepare young Yugoslavs for the Games of the XIVth Olympiad in London, where he was to go as head of the Yugoslavian athletics team. Apart from those of the XVth Olympiad in Melbourne in 1956, he was to take part in all the other Games as team leader, delegation secretary or technical adviser to the Organising Committee of the Games.

His career took a new turn with the Games of the XIXth Olympiad in Mexico. Avery Brundage, then IOC President, and Lord Burghley, President of the IAAF and member of the IOC, asked him, as Secretary General of European athletics and member of the IAAF, to leave for Mexico City for a year to help the OCOG, under the presidency of Mr. Pedro Ramírez Vázquez, IOC member. It was the opportunity he had dreamed of: to add a new language to his repertoire and, above all, to work in truly exceptional conditions, following closely the training difficulties caused by the altitude of the city. Opinions were divided, bets were being made right, left and centre : would the athletes excel themselves or would they collapse? On 18th October 1968, Artur Takac was at the stadium preparing the long jump. At what length should the measuring apparatus be set? "The world record is at 8.35 metres, so if we add 40 cm we should have a good margin". The technician complies. Bob Beamon sets off, pitches himself forward, soars and lands. The apparatus is too short and can not measure the jump. Adriaan Pauleen, later President of the IAAF, and Artur Takac take a metre-rule and kneel down on the sand. They are flabbergasted. Bob Beamon has jumped 8.90 metres !

The following year, at two in the morning in Belgrade, the telephone rang. Artur Takac took a few moments to realise that he was supposed to lift the receiver. From the Hague, Jonkheer H.E. van Karnebeek, IOC member in the Netherlands and member of the Executive Board, invited him firmly to apply for the new position of IOC Tech-

nical Director and to send his curriculum vitae within twenty-four hours. As he listened to the man on the other end of the line explaining his plans, Artur Takac remembered the innumerable conversations on Olympism which he had with Dr. Francis Messerli during their long walks beside the lake or their trips in a boat borrowed from the "Pirates d'Ouchy". How many times had Messerli spoken to him of the Baron Pierre de Coubertin and his real capacity for adaptation to the current of the time ! That April, 1969, the Baron would certainly have understood and supported the new organisation which Lord Burghley, Lord Killanin and the Jonkheer H.A. van Karnebeek wanted to institute at the IOC. It was no longer possible to work with only one secretary and a few helpers. At the 1st Olympiad in Athens in 1896, there had been thirteen National Olympic Committees and two hundred and ninety-five athletes present; in Mexico in 1968, there here six thousand six hundred and twenty-six athletes from one hundred and thirteen countries. Artur Takac was also thinking of some of the rules of the Charter, which were obsolete and out of date and which were beginning to cause problems. The Jonkheer's proposal appealed to him and he wrote to the IOC.

Some time later, he appeared before the Executive Board in Lausanne to answer its members' questions. When he learned of his appointment, he discovered that there had been seventeen other applicants. He experienced a moment of pride, mingled with much anxiety. The task was new and it was not an easy one. However, he was to work at it until 1972. Working with the Commission for the Programme, chaired by Arpad Csanadi and with the International Sports Federations, he was to work in particular on the three following points : the awarding of medals, the balance between sports and events and the participation of women.

Arpad Csanadi, who was to be honorary Sports Director from 1981 until his death in 1983, was an excellent colleague and unfailingly loyal. He had a great concern for equality. He began by settling the problem of the awarding of medals. Until 1968, for instance, medals were given to the coaches present, an injustice which had to be rectified. Although the coaches present were chosen by the Federations on the basis of criteria which did not necessarily bear any relation to the preparation of the athletes participating, they

were still specialists. It was nevertheless true that, often, the coach who had prepared a particular champion for years remained in his country and was only able to follow the competitions via the media. The simplest answer seemed to be to abolish the system of awarding medals to



*Artur Takac in Mexico, 1968.*

coaches. Another point of contention concerned the medals awarded to the winners. In gymnastics, the same athletes could receive two medals although they had only taken part in one event. The team placings for the event were arrived at by simple addition of the points of the individual competitors. It was therefore established that there would be no medal without a specific event, a rule which came into force in 1972.

Finally, in the sixties, the IOC still retained many of the prejudices of Coubertin. Certain of the Baron's contemporaries thought and said that the Baron himself would have gone back on his former statements, but there were at the IOC members very attached to the "letter". And one of the Baron de Coubertin's ideas which was well and truly outmoded was his reluctance to envisage the participation of women. Sport was now

### ANTI-DOPING ACTION

**V**ery early on, Artur Takac began to worry about doping among athletes. As an athletics specialist, it was naturally within the various disciplines of that sport that the importance of the problem and the need to take action became apparent to him. In several letters to the Chairman of the IOC Medical Commission in 1969, Prince Alexandre de Merode, Artur Takac suggests the publication of a brochure devoted to the fight against doping and the question of gender checking in sport.

*“During the last European Athletics Championships in Athens, there was once again a flagrant case of doping. The health of athletes is seriously threatened and the international sports press is writing sensational articles on the subject.*

*Many sports and medical experts are insisting on the need for a scientific publication in this area. In his letter of 16th September, President Avery Brundage also raised these important issues. At all events, it is necessary to give very precise answers and organise scientific and personal help for all those responsible. In the report which I have just submitted to the IOC Executive Board in Dubrovnik, I mentioned the possibility of writing this publication, if necessary. Naturally, the work must be done with the IOC Medical Commission, the best experts and the two IOC Directors, and the last advice of President Brundage must be respected. I hope that a favourable decision for the production of this brochure can be taken in Rome.”*

The Prince de Merode tells us that, as the IOC did not have the means to finance this brochure, he himself approached the OCOG in Munich, which considering the work to be absolutely necessary, assumed full financial responsibility for it.

open to all and since the first world war women had attained greater freedom in their behaviour and in their choices. An analysis of the programme of sports and its balance brought about, at the instigation of the “progressives”, the intro-

duction of further women’s events in athletics with the 1500 m, the 100 m hurdles and the 4 x 400 m relay as well as two new sports, archery and the one-seater kayak. The process had been given a strong impulse, for in Montreal in 1976, women were to have their rowing, basketball and handball competitions. In 1980, field hockey was added and in 1984 the 3000 m, the 400 m hurdles, the marathon, individual cycling events, cycling road races and shooting.

Meanwhile, the four-year contract Artur Takac had signed with the IOC was coming to an end. Jean Drapeau, mayor of Montreal, was aware of the fact and invited the IOC Technical Director to join the Organising Committee for the Games of the XX1st Olympiad in Montreal. Takac accepted. All adventures tempted him. In July 1944, he could have awaited the end of the war in Switzerland, but instead he had slipped clandestinely into France with two compatriots, Dimitri Petrovic and Branco Kaser to join the army of liberation. To put himself on the line when there was absolutely no need to do so was, for Takac, a challenge. And he preferred to be in on the action. He therefore spent the next four years in Canada. Once his work was completed, he was summoned to Split (YUG) to prepare as Vice-President the organisation of the 8th Mediterranean Games. These Games comprised twenty-five sports, a record for the time. What was to be the next stage? It became apparent in Athens in 1978, when the city of Sarajevo was elected by the 80th IOC Session to host the XIVth Winter Games. Artur Takac, who was a member of the candidature delegation, was appointed to the Organising Committee, becoming Director of Operations, in charge of the organisation of sport, electronic technology, medical services and the opening and closing ceremonies. After the success of Sarajevo, President Samaranch awarded him the Olympic Order and made him his personal adviser for matters of organisation of the Olympic Games.

The white hair and deliberate gestures of Artur Takac have become familiar to all members of the Olympic family.

What does this eloquent man, an ever-present observer, have in store for us now? Where shall we find him tomorrow? Perhaps in the process of signing the first volume of his memoirs!

M.-H. R.