

# BEIJNEN: ROWER AND RESISTANCE HERO

By Victor Laurentius

**The Hague, July 1924: two students from Delft get off a train at Hollandsche Spoor Station. One of them forgets his suitcase with rowing equipment. The equipment travels on to Amsterdam without its owner. In the meantime the hasty students change for the international train to Paris. They don't come further than the railway station at the frontier: Roosendaal. During a passport control the other student discovers he has forgotten his passport. The rowers of Laga, Teun Beijnen and Willy Rösingh, are on their way to Paris where they will row the coxless pairs for the Netherlands in the Games of the VIIIth Olympiad.**

This is how the legendary Antonie Christiaan ("Teun") Beijnen began his race for Olympic gold. Beijnen was born the 13th of June 1899 in the Dutch village Ophemert, situated near the river Waal. He spent his youth in Beusichem, a village nearby. From 1914 till 1920, he passed through highschool in Tiel and Utrecht. Subsequently he enrolled in 1920 at the Polytechnic School in Delft, where he studied electrical engineering. He obviously didn't like the subject, for in three years time he did not make any attempt

to sit for an examination. When he changed over to mechanical engineering his results got better, but none the less he quitted his study prematurely in 1927.

Beijnen scored much better as a rower. Immediately after arriving in Delft he joined the rowing association for students "Laga" ("Delftsche Studenten Roeivereeniging Laga"). He soon distinguished himself: during the period 1922-1927 he won 28 Dutch and foreign prizes. This made him the most successful pre-war Dutch rower. Beijnen was the best teamrower of his generation. But it was the combination with W.H.E.K. ("Willy") Rösingh which yielded the most victories. The two victories in the coxed fours during the most important Dutch rowingmatch, the Varsity, in 1923 and 1925, cannot be left unmentioned.



Antonie Christiaan  
"Teun" Beijnen

The highlight of Beijnen's rowing career was his selection for the Olympic Games of 1924. On the Seine at Argenteuil, he and Rösingh rowed against the Frenchmen Bouton and Piot on the 17th of July 1924. Four countries entered the coxless pairs: Switzerland, France, England and Holland. Because Switzerland withdrew its team a ballot was necessary. It turned out to be to the advantage of the Dutch. A race

between the French and the English had to decide which the other finalist would be. The French rowers won because one of the British rowers got a backache.

At the final the Dutch team appeared in their boat "J.A. van der Vegte". Soon after the starting shot they achieved a tempo of 41 strokes a minute. However, the headstart couldn't be consolidated.

After 1500 meters the boats went equally. But 200 meters before the finish Beijnen and Rösingh attempted a final sprint, which brought them a victory with  $\frac{1}{2}$  boatlength in front of the French. The victory was celebrated with champagne that was offered by the losers. After a period of abstinence (no alcohol, no tobacco) during the training, this gesture was certainly appreciated. The next day Beijnen and Rösingh got on the train to Zürich with a bad hangover. In Zürich they would take part in the European Championships on the second of August. Again they won a golden medal, this time in the coxed pairs. The helmsman was C.J.A. van Lummel. When Beijnen quitted his study he was not allowed to row for Laga anymore. An exception was made in 1928. Beijnen was then added as a reinforcement to the Dutch eight, during the Olympic Games in Amsterdam.

Teun Beijnen didn't owe his legendary status entirely to his rowing capacities. After retiring as a rower, he drew attention to himself several times. For example in 1930, when he married the famous operetta star Erna Hrowath. She was a Slovenian singer who acted in Fritz Hirsch's operetta company. Other celebrities in this company were Zarah Leander and Richard Tauber. In 1930, Beijnen and some of his friends saw one of their performances in Paris. They made a bet: the one

that managed to marry miss Hrowath would win a bottle of jenever. Beijnen won the bottle and he moved with his bride to his family home in Beusichem.

Beijnen was also a car-fanatic. In 1931 or 1932 he took part in the Monte Carlo-Rally. As starting point he drew Warsaw. This prevented a victory beforehand, because of the lousy roads. Beijnen had time and money for this kind of adventures. He had his own personal assets and the yields of his orchards in Beusichem, the liqueur distillery "Beijnania" in The Hague and a timbermill in France.

Not many people know that Beijnen played an important role in the Second World War. As a leader of the resistance in Beusichem he was confronted with many allied soldiers who ended up behind enemy lines after the lost battle in Arnhem. Through complicated escape routes they were led to their own lines. Beijnen wasn't afraid to hide British soldiers on his own attic. This was very courageous, because three quarter of the house was being used by the German Wehrmacht. The German general Philippi used Beijnen's house as his headquarters. Just before the German capitulation, Philippi even welcomed the commander of the German troops in the Netherlands. Field Marshall Blaskowitz. It was of great importance that Teun Beijnen was able to overhear the conversation between the two officers. Blaskowitz told Philippi that he wanted to slow



Paris 1924 Olympic Games - Beijnen and Rösingh

down the negotiations with the Allies, because he was afraid his army would become prisoners of war in Russia. Beijnen passed this military secret on as fast as possible to the Allied Forces. So they knew straightaway what the real intention of the negotiation partner was. Blaskowitz was ordered to Wageningen on the 5th of May 1945. There he was told clearly what the Allied capitulation demands were. A day later he signed the capitulation.

Teun Beijnen died rather suddenly on July 13th 1949. His death was caused by a paralysed heartmuscle. It was a result of his smoking addiction. When there was a cigarette shortage during the war he even smoked his own grown tobacco mixed with beechtree leaves. All the inhabitants of Beusichem attended his funeral. A tangible remembrance of Teun Beijnen is being kept in the Olympic Museum in Lausanne: the more than 70 years old “J.A. van der Vegte”, the boat with which Beijnen and Røisingh won their Olympic medal.

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#### *...continued from page 42*

(2) Coubertin favoured separate recognition for Ireland, as well as other small European countries ruled by Empires prior to World War I (*Mémoires Olympique* pp. 120/121). It is interesting to see Ireland included in a list, published in 1913, of 35 nations that were to be allowed to participate in the Games planned for Berlin in 1916. (see “*Citius, Altius, Fortius*”, vol.4 no.1, p.11 – article by F. Kolář and J. Kossl).

**Addendum by Séamus Ware**: (based on an interview in the 1980s. between Dr. Cyril White of Dublin with Bridget Boland, daughter of John Pius Boland, double Olympic tennis champion in 1896).

In August 1916, Bridget (then a young girl) remembers that the children in the Boland family were sent to bed early because important visitors were coming to see her father at his house in St. George’s Square, London. She later learned from her mother that the visitors were Herbert Asquith, British Prime Minister, and John Redmond, leader of the Irish Parliamentary Party in the House of Commons.

They came to Boland’s house because he was an M.P. (for South Kerry) and Acting Chief Whip of the Irish Party at the time.

The purpose of the visit was to discuss and read the (alleged) diaries of Roger Casement, which showed him to have been engaged in homosexual activities in the Congo and the Amazon Basin.

Casement had just been sentenced to death for high treason, and the Irish Party was considering supporting calls for a reprieve or commuting of the death sentence, as happened in case of some leaders of the 1916 Irish Easter Rising such as Eamon de Valera. The “secret” diaries were used by the British Government to try and dissuade prominent figures – Irish Catholic Bishops, Irish- American leaders, and the Irish Party – from such action, and they succeeded.

The visitors stayed overnight, talking and reading documents with John Boland. The following morning, Bridget heard Asquith thank her mother for the hospitality. When she saw her father at breakfast, he looked “utterly drained”.