

ALFRED SCHIFF

A JEWISH ARCHAEOLOGIST AS A LINK BETWEEN ANCIENT AND MODERN OLYMPIC GAMES¹



by Walter Borgers

Olympic Roots

A small brochure commemorating the unveiling of the bust of Ernst CURTIUS in the Museum of Olympia that took place end of April 1896 contains the address of Alfred SCHIFF, given in the name of the younger disciples of CURTIUS.² SCHIFF was at that time 31 years old and had come to Greece from Rome where he had stayed at the *German Archaeological Institute* for two years. His address was followed by that of the Director of the American School, Prof. RICHARDSON.

In a letter to Carl DIEM, dated January 20, 1933, SCHIFF has called this address in commemoration of Ernst CURTIUS his "*entr e*" to Greece where he stayed from this time on for more than ten years. The text was published in Greek newspapers and this was the reason that he was asked "*to take care of the German interests in the first Olympic Games*". It was at Olympia that the "germ-cell" of SCHIFF'S connection with the Olympic Games was placed and the upcoming Olympic Games in Athens seemed to be a good opportunity for a commemorative note on this pioneer of the German Olympic movement.

His first link to the Modern Olympic Games can be dated back to September 10, 1895. This is the date of a letter of the *Comit  Hell ne des Jeux Olympiques* signed by its secretary Georg von STREIT, that can be found in the estate of SCHIFF in the *Diem-Archives*. The German born STREIT, attach  of the German team, was also present when the Germans were welcomed to the Olympic Games on April 5, 1896. Wilhelm D RPFELD, on behalf the German-Greek association Philadelphia,³ and we can assume, Alfred SCHIFF too, were members of the welcoming committee. STREIT'S letter connects the German

Philhellenism with sport and the possibilities to improve the international relations what also reveals his connection to the peace movement:

*"Up to now in Germany only little has been published on the Olympic Games, whereas on the other hand in Germany, whose enthusiasm for everything classical and whose predilection for the native place of Greek antiquity is well-known, a deep interest in the reconstruction of this institution based on modern foundations should prevail, which will without any doubt have a blessed influence on the international relations."*⁴

It seems that Alfred SCHIFF has been part of the German Olympic movement, already before the first Committee for the Participation of Germany in the Olympic Games at Athens 1896 was founded in Berlin on December 13, 1895. Despite of this little is known about his biography and especially how he earned his living throughout his life. I will emphasize some biographical facts that show his role as a link between the world of archaeology and the new world of sports.

After settling in Athens in April 1895 SCHIFF took part in the journey of the *Imperial German Archaeological Institute* covering the Peloponnesis (April 16–30). The list of participants of this journey organised by D RPFELD includes six members of the American School at Athens in the group of 31.⁵ On the last day of the stay at Olympia the unveiling of the bust of CURTIUS took place. A trip to the Aegean sea followed in May. On this trip SCHIFF discovered a marble rooftop-akroterion under the relics of the Nemesis-Temple at Rhamnus that was published later.⁶ In 1895 SCHIFF joined the Enneakrunos-excavation at Athens. SCHIFF'S last entry in the excavation diary is dated December 12, 1895.⁷

- 1 This lecture is based on documents from the estate of Alfred Schiff, now in the Diem-Archive, Cologne. If not otherwise stated the mentioned documents have been taken from this source.
- 2 *Die Ernst Curtius-B ste im Museum zu Olympia. Bericht f r die an der Stiftung Beteiligten.* (Archiv des Deutschen Arch ologischen Instituts, Berlin).
- 3 For the contribution of the Philadelphia to the Olympic Games of 1896 cf. BARTH, Wilhelm, *Geschichte der Deutschen Gesellschaft Philadelphia in Athen*, Athen 1936, pp. 59-60.
- 4 Estate of Alfred Schiff (Diem-Archive, Cologne).
- 5 Kaiserliches Deutsches Arch ologisches Institut in Athen, *Reise durch den Peloponnes 1895*. 16.-30. April. Athen 1894 (Diem-Archive).
- 6 Cf. *Jahrbuch des Arch ologischen Instituts*, 1896, p. 132.
- 7 Information kindly given by Klaus Herrmann, Deutsches Arch ologisches Institut, Athens.

Obviously SCHIFF lived at Athens and Alexandria during the following years. In the Greek-Turkish war of 1897 he served in an ambulance corps near Thermophylae and received the Greek *Order of the Saviour (Erlöserorden)*.

In the following years he was member of the excavation team at Thera, together with his friend, the Baron Friedrich Hiller von GAERTRINGEN, who reports that "*once Alfred Schiff sacrificed three weeks of his time solely to supervise the work of a skilled professional photographer from a scientific and artistic point of view*"⁸. After having been a corresponding member for several years, Schiff became regular member of the Imperial German Archaeological Institute in 1901. Before, in 1898, he was also elected into the governing body of the Philadelphia-Society at Athens.⁹

In 1900 he probably did researches for his dissertation Alexandria where he stayed together with his friend Hiller von GAERTRINGEN, possibly doing research for his dissertation. In 1904, aged 41, he took his doctor's degree at the University of Rostock with a thesis on "Alexandrinische Dipinti" under the supervision of Gustav KÖRTE.¹⁰ From 1906 to 1930 he was member of the board of the *German Archaeological Society*. Little is known about his career. 1908 he was appointed professor and was involved in the organisation of the International Congress of Historians at Berlin. Probably he lived on his private means at that time.

German Olympic Pioneer

His return to Germany in 1904 was also the starting point of his career in the German National Olympic Committee (*Deutscher Reichsauschuß für Olympische Spiele*). He was a founding member of this body and took part in the formulation of the first statute. Later he was elected to the board and as head of the financial commission. From the start - after the Olympic Games at Athens in 1906 had inspired the German delegation - he was involved in the

plans for a German Stadium at Berlin and later in the preparations for the Olympic Games 1916.

After World War I he was, together with DIEM and some others, one of the main supporters for the plans for a *German Sports University (Deutsche Hochschule für Leibesübungen)* in Berlin. It was founded as a private institution in 1920 by the Reichsausschuß and SCHIFF became its administration director, Carl DIEM was named "Prorektor". SCHIFF was also lecturing there on the history of the Olympic Games and sport in antiquity.

This activity came to an abrupt end in April 1933 when he was forced to leave the *Deutsche Hochschule für Leibesübungen* together with DIEM, after anti-internationalist Nazi-students, in hurrying obedience to their leaders had planted oak-trees on the racing courses and the Nazi-Government was planning a total reconstruction of the sports and university-system.

Contribution to the so-called Nazi-Games

Sheltered by IOC-protection Theodor LEWALD, of Jewish descent as SCHIFF, and Carl DIEM retained the organisation of the Berlin Olympic Games as a field of activity, that despite of the involvement of the Government, opened some free spaces.¹¹ DIEM, who was controlling the finances as General Secretary, used his position to help his friend with smaller jobs for the Organising Committee (articles, research). SCHIFF'S economic situation was so bad that he was dependent on the "*charitable pension*" DIEM could pay him from the Olympic funds.

SCHIFF'S main field of activity in the Berlin Olympics, however, was the exhibition "Sport in Hellenic Times" though his dominant role in its planning and preparation has been neglected by historians so far. The exhibition was jointly staged by the Organising Committee and the general director of the State Museum and opened on the eve of the Olympic Games (July

8 HILLER von GAERTRINGEN, Friedrich, *Ausgrabungen in Griechenland*, Berlin 1901, p. 30.

9 BARTH, *Geschichte*, p. 65.

10 SCHIFF, Alfred, *Alexandrinische Dipinti*, Leipzig 1905.

11 Recently Christiane Eisenberg has interpreted the so-called Nazi-Games as a kind of a temporary "time-out" (Auszeit). Cf. EISENBERG, Christiane, *"English Sports" und deutsche Bürger. Eine Gesellschaftsgeschichte 1800-1939*, Paderborn/München/Wien/Zürich 1999, pp. 424, 441.

12 *Sport der Hellenen. Ausstellung Griechischer Bildwerke im Deutschen Museum zu Berlin veranstaltet vom Organisationskomitee der 11. Olympiade und dem Generaldirektor der Staatlichen Museen. Beschreibung der Bildwerke von Carl Bluemel*, Berlin 1936.

29, 1936) in the Deutsches Museum at Berlin. The catalogue names Carl BLÜMEL as responsible for the description of the objects.¹² Documents from SCHIFF'S estate in the *Diem-Archives*, however, show that, it was SCHIFF who laid down the concept in December 1934 under the title The exhibition "Sport in antiquity" planned for the XI. Olympic Games in Berlin 1936. As the descriptions of the objects he chose reveal, SCHIFF wanted to give a historical panorama of Greek agonistics and gymnastics by combining original sculptures, copies that were specially made for the exhibition and also vases and other sports related objects with fotos, drawings and models. Not only the aesthetic quality of the artwork was to be shown but also the technical aspects of sports in antiquity.¹³ It was SCHIFF'S plan to donate the models and copies made for the exhibition to universities for their collections of plaster copies. His modern concept of an archaeological exhibition in the tradition of German philhellenism can be interpreted as an attempt to exclude political interpretations that tried to convert the image of the Greek athlete into a model for the Aryan "Übermensch". A photo from the exhibition shows the early Augustean bronze figure of the sitting Hermes from the Villa dei Papiri in Neapel, the charioteer from Delphi, the sitting boxer from the Thermae in Rome and the scraper from Ephesos coming from Vienna. All these sculptures were copies. Only the two figures on the left of the photo are originals: The famous "Boy from Salamis" and the "Praying young boy". Some of the copies survived: The "boxer" and the "scraper" are today standing on the terraces of the Olympic stadium. At least some of the copies were financed from the funds of the *Dr. Lewald-Foundation*. A respective note was printed on the invitation to preview of the copy of the "Javelin throwing Zeus" on October 19, 1935. This copy that has a twin brother in the atrium of the *German Sport University Cologne* was taken from the original in the Athens Museum, that was pulled from the sea near Cap Artemision in 1928.

It seems to be a sign of the irony of history when the exhibition "Sport in Hellenic Times", planned and prepared by the Jewish archaeologist Alfred SCHIFF and partly financed by the *Dr. Lewald-Foundation*, is transformed

by sport and art historians of our time as fitting into the Nazi strategy of propagating the body image of a nordic hellenism. SCHIFF planned the exhibition based on the principles of humanism and on his first hand knowledge of Greek antiquity. He is not mentioned in the catalogue though his concept was hardly changed. Carl BLÜMEL the archaeologist and member of the State Museums at Berlin gave his name that was used – so to say - as an aryan cloak.

The exhibition was not the only field where SCHIFF influenced the Hellenistic traits in the design of the Berlin Games. The Olympic Torch Relay was planned by Carl DIEM, who was receiving detailed information on the torch relays in antiquity and on related art objects from Schiff. His respective handwritings are also preserved in the *Diem-Archives*.

Another plan for the Berlin Olympics also worked out by Alfred SCHIFF is titled: "The Zeus-Temple of Olympia at the XI. Olympic Games". It is dated March 1934:

"The plan to build a true copy of the Zeus-Temple of Olympia for the sporting art exhibition to be connected with the Olympic Games of 1936 would be such an obvious link between antiquity and present time, as it has – on such scale and impression – never been tried nor even accomplished in previous Olympic Games." This idea, however, remained in the state of a plan, and no hints have so far been found on any further steps. SCHIFF'S suggestions for the interior design as exhibition room and for the direction of light show that he was not only building temples in the air. We should be happy that Joseph GOEBBELS was deprived of the chance to open the Olympic Art exhibition in a reconstruction of an Olympic sanctuary.

Olympic Legacy

King GEORGE II. of Greece honored Alfred SCHIFF with the *Commander Cross of the Phenix-Order* in 1936 and thus he received approbation from the nation that was the cradle of his Olympic activities. In Germany – as his letters to Carl DIEM show – he was humiliated and scholars who were able to adapt to the new rulers were gathering his harvest.

Alfred SCHIFF died in Berlin on January 30, 1939. His wife and two daughters emigrated to England. When Carl DIEM and Gerhart RODENWALDT gathered for looking after SCHIFF'S

13 Cf. LEHMANN, Jens, *Der jüdische Archäologe Alfred Schiff und die Berliner Ausstellung "Sport der Hellenen"*. Manuscript (Diem-Archive).



estate, or better the rests that had survived his economic calamities, the remaining documents were divided between the *Archaeological Institute* and the Director of the *International Olympic Institute* in Berlin.

Alfred SCHIFF'S Olympic legacy was taken over by Carl DIEM with his plans for an Olympic

Academy and also for the continuation of the excavations in Olympia. In our efforts to find links between the Greek heritage and the design of truly modern Olympic Games in Athens 2004, I think, we are becoming part of this legacy.