

by Ove Karlsson



Erich Kamper (r.) was awarded the Olympic Order as decided by the 92nd IOC session, 1987 in Istanbul. The order was handed over by Philipp von Schoeller, IOC member in Austria 1977-2000 (honorary member since 2000), at a ceremony on Nov. 27, 1988.

A highly respected Olympic historian and statistician, Erich KAMPER would have been 90 this year, if alive. However, he died nine years ago.

ISOH members certainly recognize, I am convinced, KAMPER as a "very reliable source". Younger colleagues might not, however, be familiar with the person behind the name.

KAMPER was the guiding light behind the creation of the ISOH, and – as an example to us all with his experience, power of initiative and accuracy – elected Honorary president at the founding meeting Dec. 5, 1991.

Erich KAMPER was born June 22, 1914, in Mitterdorf/Mürztal (Styria), Austria, and died Nov. 9, 1995, in his home town of Graz.

Already in his teens, he became interested in the Olympic Games and started research into its history in the early 1930s. At the time, the field was almost unfilled:

"There were already thousands of Olympic books and articles but almost exclusively they dealt with ethical, pedagogical and sociological aspects of the Olympic Games. The Olympic historians and scientists were only little interested in the Olympic competitions and athletes and their performances. They

preferred and still prefer scientific essays, discussions, and interpretations." [Kamper in *Citius, Altius, Fortius. The ISOH Journal* 1(1992)1]

In 1947, Kamper got in touch with the German Olympic historian Dr. Fritz WASNER, well-known for his *Olympia Lexikon* (1939), and this further inspired and encouraged him.

KAMPER followed the Olympics 1928–1994, and was present at 13 celebrations (incl. three Winter Games) 1936–1992. Jesse OWENS, the star of the first Games KAMPER covered, remained his No. 1 Olympian.

The favorite sport

Track and field athletics was his favorite sport, both as a young athlete and later as a researcher/historian/statistician. According to *Mein Wettkampfbuch* (My competition book), he for example won both discus (32.43) and javelin (37.77) at the 1933 club championships of the Gratkorn section of the *Arbeiter Turn- und Sportbund* (ATUS), where he also played handball. He had to give up competitive sport because of an elbow injury before entering the senior ranks.

A founding member of the *Association of Track and Field Statisticians*, in 1950, he was a regular contributor to the ATFS year-book and named Honorary member in 1986.

From 1940–78, KAMPER was correspondent for the Berlin magazine *Der Leichtathlet* (–1944)/ *Leichtathletik* (1950–). In France during World War II, he continued to write for *Der Leichtathlet*. As contributor already in the latter part of the 1930s, he became a good friend of editor-in-chief, Heinz CAVALIER, later editor-in-chief also of *Leichtathletik*.

Somewhat a pioneer in compiling complete statistics, KAMPER was asked right after the war, by the president of the *Österreichischer Leichtathletik-Verband*, to help in reconstructing the record lists, as the association office had been destroyed during the war. KAMPER was a main contributor to *Leichtathletik in Österreich* (1966) and compiled (in co-operation with Mag. [later Dr.] Karl GRAF) the history of Austrian track and field athletics in *Österreichs Leichtathletik in Namen und Zahlen* (1986).

Hobby turned into profession

From 1932, before finishing his studies, he had assignments as a freelance writer (and photographer), in – among other papers – *Sport in Österreich*.

After graduating from the *Bundes-Handelsakademie* in Graz, in the summer of 1933, he worked as correspondent and clerk at the general insurance company (for accidents and injuries) in Graz. In military service, from the autumn of 1938 until May 1945, he was sent to Poland and France during the war.

Passionately interested in sports in general and the Olympic Games in particular, the hobby turned into a full-time profession when he became sports editor of the Graz daily *Neue Zeit* from its start in January 1946 until he reached retirement age in June 1979.

(*Neue Zeit* was until July 1987, when the employees took over, the party organ of the *Sozialistische Partei Österreichs*, with a certain independency, however. SPÖ in 1991 changed its name to *Sozialdemokratische Partei Österreichs*; *Neue Zeit* ceased publication April 30, 2001.)

Olympic standard works

KAMPER'S books on the Olympics are recognized world-wide as standard works on the modern Games:

Lexikon der Olympischen Winterspiele (with text in four languages: German, English,

French and Swedish; Union Verlag, Stuttgart, 1964),

Enzyklopädie der Olympischen Spiele (Redaktionsbüro Harenberg, Dortmund, 1972) / *Encyclopedia of the Olympic Games* (McGraw-Hill, New York, 1972), *Lexikon der 12 000 Olympioniken* (Leykam-Verlag, Graz, 1975),

Lexikon der 14 000 Olympioniken (Leykam-Verlag, Graz, 1983; sold in 68 countries on five continents and named Sports book of the year in West Germany),

Olympische Heroen – Portraits und Anekdoten von 1896 bis heute, with Herbert SOUCEK, an old school-mate (Spiridon Verlag, Erkrath, 1991)/*Olimpiadi Gli Eroi Olimpici* (Vallardi & Associati, Milan, 1992), and

The Golden Book of the Olympic Games, with Bill MALLON (Vallardi & Associati, Milan, 1992).

Originally without his knowledge, *Enzyklopädie der Olympischen Spiele* provided the main part of historical information to the 1972 Olympia-Computer "Golym" in Munich. After KAMPER'S objections, an amicable agreement was reached.

After the war, his annual top-20 lists for Austrian athletics and swimming appeared in *Sport-Schau* (Vienna). In addition, he contributed (from 1948) to numerous other publications, Austrian and foreign, including the German magazine *Olympi-sches Feuer*. *The Guinness Book of Olympic Records* and *The Guinness Book of Records*. Further, he was responsible for the subjects Olympic Games, winter sports, track and field athletics and (international) swimming in *Die Stars des Sports von A–Z* (Carl Habel Verlagsbuchhandlung, Berlin and Darmstadt, 1970).

An Olympic detective with a strict language

"*The Sherlock Holmes of the five rings*" "killed" many myths and unsatisfactorily checked articles. Already for his first *Who's Who* (1975), some thousand errors in previous publications were corrected. In his research, KAMPER used – checked and double-checked – sources from some 30 countries and wrote around 8,000 letters to individuals and organisations in 62 countries on five continents: NOCs, athletes, sports associations and clubs, libraries, public registers, etc.

Once in Athens, he found a file on the 1900 Games at the office of the *Greek Olympic Committee*, borrowed it overnight, made short-

hand notes during the night and returned the file the following day.

His thorough research proved, with the help of colleagues/friends around the world, for example that George ORTON (athletics 1900) was Canadian, not U.S. American; that Adolf SPINLER (gymnastics 1904) was Swiss, not German; that Julius LENHART (gymnastics 1904) was Austrian, not U.S. American, etc. Not to mention all corrections to the spelling of names.

To KAMPER, there were only two kinds of journalists: those with a flowery language, "*not necessarily careful with the facts*", and those with a strict language.

KAMPER himself, no doubt, belonged to the latter category. But strict language doesn't have to be a contrast to interesting, entertaining text, which KAMPER showed for example in *Neue Zeit* and *Olympische Heroen*.

A never-ending task

A prolific, fascinating personality, deeply devoted to the Olympics, he also had an outstanding knowledge of non-Olympic sports and in general of the world around us.

His was a never-ending task, but he went on with discipline, punctuality and exactness, remaining true to his passion. "*You certainly don't get rich by writing books such as mine ...*"

A person with extreme knowledge of – and a phenomenal memory for – facts and figures, he was called "*König der Statistiker*" (King of the Statisticians), the prototype of an encyclopedic writer. He was said to have a "*computer brain*" and to be a "*human data base*".

He never worked with a computer, it was a strange world to him. Instead, he kept to the *Olympia* (!) typewriter he had used since 1946! What would have been if he had used a computer...

Known to be a perfectionist, the working room in his 100 square meters apartment looked to be in turmoil, however. But it was a "*creative chaos*"; he himself knew exactly where to find files, cuttings, etc.

His large library/archive included some 3,000 books from around 40 countries and press cuttings from Austrian and foreign news papers/magazines (incl. information on appr. 50,000 athletes from all over the world), cuttings stuck on ca 140,000 pages in roughly 250 thick files.

He had an extensive correspondence, exchanging information and views with colleagues, asking and answering questions from individuals and organisations around the world. Except German, he was fluent in French, wrote also in

English and read several other languages, including Swedish.

Prominent awards

In 1966 and 1975, KAMPER was invited as a lecturer at the sessions of the *International Olympic Academy* (Athens/Olympia), of which he was made an honorary member in 1969 "*in recognition of valuable services to Olympism*". (KAMPER later became a member of the *Österreichische Olympische Akademie*, founded in 1982.)

The *Association Internationale de la Presse Sportive* (AIPS), the International Sports Press Association, honoured him "*for distinguished services to sports journalism*" at its 50th anniversary in 1974.

In 1987, the *International Olympic Committee* awarded KAMPER the Olympic Order (silver) in "*recognition of his services to the Olympic Movement*".

In Austria, he received the *Sport-Oskar-Medaille*, awarded by the *Österreichische Turn- und Sport-Union* (1984) and the *Grosses Ehrenzeichen des Landes Steiermark* (1990).

A friendly gentleman, down-to-earth and humorous, KAMPER could, however, sometimes be stubborn.

In 1981 he refused the *Silberne Ehrenzeichen für Verdienste um die Republik* because the Austrian vice-chancellor, Dr. Fred SINOWATZ, some seven years earlier (when SINOWATZ already was Minister of Education, also responsible for sports) had declined to write the preface in KAMPER'S *Lexikon der 12 000 Olympioniken*.

Lord KILLANIN, IOC President at the time, wrote instead: "*Mr. Erich Kamper has taken on a really painstaking task. Thanks to his patient and careful work he gives us here an irreplaceable and invaluable book, [...] We are most grateful to him and hope that the now completed trilogy of his works will give rise to new ventures.*"

An hard-working "early bird"

The doyen of Olympic historians, his life in retirement was dominated by two things: the family and the Olympic Games.

His wife, Margot, died in 1985 (they were married for 41 years). They had two daughters, Beate (1945-93) and Ingrid (1946–).

KAMPER continued to work hard, best proved by the fact that three of his books were published when he was aged 69–78. He was an "early bird", sometimes working already at 06.00, reading news papers for at least three hours a day and writing an average of five letters/day

(more near deadline for his books). He kept very fit, both physically and mentally, walking (he never owned a car!) for at least one hour daily, regardless of the weather, weekdays to empty his post box. Three times a week he also went to the *Styrian Landesbibliothek* to read news papers and magazines, in addition to the many he subscribed to. Even in his last years, he was often travelling abroad, for example to Morocco and China.

His passion for sports and the Olympic Games remained to the very end. He was untiringly updating his archive until taken to the hospital where he died a few weeks later. He had himself planned everything for his own funeral, where the *Olympic Hymn* was played.

A mentor very dear to my heart

In a letter written more than two years before he died, and mailed by his daughter Ingrid shortly after his death, I was named main beneficiary of his sports library/archive. Needless to say, I was shocked, but also deeply touched, not least by his last words: "Ich habe Deine Freundschaft sehr geschätzt" (I have appreciated your friendship very much).

I noticed the name Erich KAMPER for the first time in the mid-1960s, after his *Lexikon der*

Olympischen Winterspiele had been published, and got to know him in the early 1970s, thanks to his long-time Swedish friend Erik JUFÄLT. After JUFÄLT'S death in 1981, our contacts increased rapidly, despite (or, perhaps, thanks to) a difference in age of 30 years. We met for the first time in 1983, in Helsinki for the first World Championships in track and field athletics. In his last years, we spoke often on the phone, several times a month, in addition to trading letters.

Erich could be sarcastic, sometimes harsh, but he was in fact a very warm-hearted and helpful person. Many people "used" him; got his help and information without even saying "Thank you". However, if you at least tried to help him, he was very generous in return.

It has taken considerable time to sort out the material inherited, and still a lot of his correspondence remain to be handled. All of us have our own system of filing, but I have – without in any way trying to compare myself to KAMPER – noticed, that we had/have a similar approach to this and some other matters. Hard to explain, but Erich KAMPER is still, especially when dealing with his material, in a way very much alive to me, remaining my mentor in several ways.