

## ***THE OLYMPIC MOVEMENT IN SLOVAKIA***

*by Jan Grexa*

Until 1918, Slovaks had lived within Hungarian lands, or more accurately, within the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and then, until the year 1993, in a common state with the Czechs. The war years of 1939-1945 were the only exception, when, as a result of strong pressure from Fascist Germany, a relatively independent Slovak State was founded. The reasons for the recent split of Czechoslovakia into two independent states after the fall of the authoritarian regime are well-known.

It follows from the above that the Slovak Republic had its true Olympic premiere at the XVIIth Olympic Winter Games in Lillehammer, but this does not mean that Slovaks had not participated in Olympic Games before then. On the contrary, Slovakia has been committed to the spirit of the modern Olympics from the very beginning. Information that at the first Olympic Games in Athens a native Slovak, Alojz Szokol, noted in all records as Alajos Szokolyi, participated with the assigned number of one in the first competition discipline - 100 meters run - is symbolic.

By World War I, at least 12 other Olympians, all native Slovaks, had represented the nation under other banners: Zoltan Hamaj [Halmay] (1900, 1904, 1908), Zoltan Speidl (1900), Stefan Drubina (1908), Frantizek Jesina (1908), Mor Koczan (1908, 1912), Juraj Luntzer (1908, 1912), Alexander Prokopp (1908, 1912), Frantizek Facinek Forgacs (1912), Ladislav Kmetyko (1912), Karol Kobulsky (1912), Frantisek Sobota (1912) and Ivan Wardener (1912). Mor Koczan, who placed third in throwing the javelin at Stockholm in 1912, also represented Czechoslovakia at the Olympics in Paris in 1924.

We consider these Olympians to belong not only to Hungarian but also to Slovak sports history: in another political situation, they could have represented Slovakia, as could, for example, the Czech athletes have represented the Czech Republic. It is known that German oppression in the Austrian part of the Monarchy, where Bohemia belonged, was not so aggressive as the Magyarization in the Hungarian part of the Monarchy. The Czech Olympic Committee could, therefore, have existed contemporary to the Austrian Olympic Committee and the Czechs could have had the right to their own Olympic representation.

Similar development was unthinkable in Slovakia; only exclusively Hungarian clubs and associations could exist, including the Hungarian Olympic Committee. This was a typical expression of the enforcement of the policy of the uninational Hungarian lands, i.e., the Hungarian States, though there were several national minorities living in these Hungarian lands. The majority of the world's languages do not distinguish between the terms Ungarn (citizen of Hungarian lands) and Magyar (member of the ruling nation).

This difference is aptly characterized by the Austrian author E. Niedermann's mentioning that the national program dominant in Hungarian lands had found an antithesis in the Austrian part of the Monarchy. According to Niedermann, this was the main reason for minorities living in the Hungarian part of the empire directing their attention, not to Budapest, but to Bucharest, Belgrade and Prague. The more tolerant handling of minorities can be evidenced by the quotation by Karl Leuger (Mayor of Vienna 1897-1910): "I recognize exclusively equal nations in Austrian, I see in every Czech, in every Slovenian, my Austrian

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<sup>1</sup>Niederman, E. - Tollich, H. - Kutassi, L.: *Die Olympische Bewegung in Osterreich und Ungarn von den Anfängen bis 1918*. OOC Wien, p. 13

fellow-citizen. . . . All national groups are equal and every group has the undeniable rights to the protection of its own nationality and the care of it.”<sup>2</sup>

Since the first Olympic Games, Hungarians participated in the Games as part of the separate Hungarian lands, i. e., a Hungarian expedition. They respected democratic national principles within the dual empire, but within its Hungarian part they enforced *de facto* the principle of one Hungarian nation. They did not change their approach, not even after the year 1910 when the Austrian authorities increased the pressure to establish a single common Olympic representation. The letter of the Hungarian lands Ministry of Culture and Education addressed to Vienna (30 November 1911), emphasizing that the Hungarian lands did not find their position to be inferior and insisted on taking part in the Olympic Games as an independent state, not only as a part of the Monarchy, is also symbolic.<sup>3</sup>

In the first years of the existence of the Olympic Movement, the idea of sporting geography was applied thanks to Coubertin, according to which the developed sports nations (which the Slovak nation did not belong to at that time) had the right to separate participation in the Olympic Games without regard to their national sovereignty. Bohemia, for one, took advantage of this possibility. As early as 1896, Czech Jirí Guth presented requirements that not only Hungarians and Czechs but also other nationalities living in the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy should have the right to their own National Olympic Committees.

Based on this idea, the secretary of the Czech Olympic Committee, Josef Rössler, developed an initiative. His correspondence with Coubertin from the year 1899 can be found in the Archives of the Museum of the IOC. He informed Coubertin that Czechs were prepared to organize the participation of the Poles, Croats, Slovenians, Serbs and Slovaks in the Olympic Games of 1900. Further, he pleaded with Coubertin to be open to the idea of inviting “Slavic brothers” and assured him that the Czech committee was able to enumerate representatives of the mentioned nations.<sup>4</sup> This proposal was never realized and the sportsmen of the above nationalities represented exclusively Austria or Hungary, with the exception of Serbia at the Olympic Games of 1912.

On this occasion, however, Rössler did not propose anyone from Slovakia. Oppression to Magyarization was increasing in this period and Slovakia, which was at the time economically and educationally backward, preferred to give its attention to the primary existential questions of national survival. But sports clubs also existed at the end of the 19th century in every town in Slovakia. Their leaders, however, were not Slovaks, but Hungarians and, occasionally Germans. It is important to note that in the majority of cases sports associations became a tool of merciless assimilation and on the eve of World War I also were used for the militarization of sport.

The foundation of the Czechoslovak State secured for Slovaks free national development, in spite of various negative elements, reflected also by the development of a sports movement on a national level. The remaining Hungarian or Magyarized officials were quickly replaced with the help of Bohemian officials, which had a greater national sporting organization. Czech sports associations that had been in existence since the 1800s expanded their activity in Slovakia after the foundation of Czechoslovakia and the same applied to the Czech Olympic Committee; in November 1918 it was transformed into the Czechoslovak Olympic Committee (CSOV). We must state, however, that the representation of Slovakia, in the CSOV was purely symbolic. For example, in the period of 1933-36 among contributing

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<sup>2</sup>“Alle Volksstämme des Staates sind gleichberechtigt und jeder Volksstamm hat ein unverletzliches Recht auf Wahrung und Pflege seiner Nationalität.” Ibid., p. 20.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 61.

<sup>4</sup>IOC Archives, Lausanne.

members there was one individual member and eight collective members, among active members one individual and two collective members.<sup>5</sup>

On 14 March 1939, the Slovak Republic was formed and the new constitutional order also determined the foundation of the Slovak Olympic Committee (SOV). At the beginning of 1939 it was assumed that in the next year there would be Olympic Games held in Garmisch-Partenkirchen and in Helsinki, and plans for Slovak Olympic participation in those Games arose. Firstly, the Slovak Olympic Fund was founded, the so-called "Olympic tax" was introduced for the newly created sports associations and the SOV was founded on 18 June 1939.

The first reference to the SOV is the report on the foundation of the preparatory committee<sup>6</sup> that had its session on 12 May 1939. In response to the supreme sports body - the Slovak Central Sports Council (Slovenska ustredna sportova rada [SUSR]) - a plenary meeting for the constitution of the SOV was held on 18 June 1939. MUDr. Gejza Rehak was appointed as chairman (after his death his place was taken by JUDr. Terland), and JUDr. Vojtech Okolicsanyi as the first secretary. Leaders for 10 Olympic sports were appointed as members as well as two representatives of the German Physical Training and Sports Association and one representative of the Hungarian Physical Training Association.

The bye-laws were ratified, proclaiming the ideological and organizational independence of the SOV. Paragraph 4 reads, ". . .the SOV is an association standing apart from all sports organizations of the Slovak State. It is not inferior to any other organization of the Slovak State and its members and official decide and agree solely upon their best knowledge and belief and profit of sport in the Slovak State."<sup>7</sup> The activity of the SOV was focused on its formal acknowledgement at home and abroad within the IOC. The Regional Office approved the bye-laws of the SOV on 23 December 1939.<sup>8</sup>

At the same time, the SOV asked itself to be recognized by the IOC in the form of a letter of 17 June 1939, in which it informed the president, Baillet-Latour, about its foundation and asked for instructions on further proceedings. Dr. Rehak received an answer from the secretary of the IOC on 24 July 1939, in which the SOV was accepted,<sup>9</sup> noting that this fact would be announced in *Révue Olympique* published in Berlin at that time.

In the next letter, of 5 August 1939, the Slovak party expressed its gratitude and asked to be sent necessary materials, and registered its ice hockey team and its nordic skiers for Garmisch-Partenkirchen. The answer was prompt again, the secretary of the IOC informed the SOV that all materials would be provided by the International Olympic Institute in Berlin, led by a well-known specialist, Carl Diem.<sup>10</sup> The quick acceptance of the SOV (naturally still only preliminary, as the plenary meeting of the IOC had not yet been held) was quite understandable, as Slovakia was a satellite of the country which held the temporary seat of the IOC (Germany).

During the year 1940, the SOV developed several activities. It secured the participation of sportsmen in Garmisch-Partenkirchen, commenced the production of sports stamps, and on 14 December 1940, it held a plenary meeting that elected a new chairman - JUDr. Terland. The SOV received a grant for its activity from the Regional Office, amounting to 40,000

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<sup>5</sup>State Central Archives (Stani uredni archiv - SUA), Prague, Fund of the Czechoslovak Olympic Committee (CSOV).

<sup>6</sup>*Slovak*, 7 May 1939.

<sup>7</sup>Slovak National Archives (Slovensky narodny archiv - SNA), Bratislava, Fund of the PV (Preparatory Committee) Security Department, ch. 39, Articles of the SOV (Slovak Olympic Committee).

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, ch. 139.

<sup>9</sup>IOC Archives, Lausanne.

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*.

<sup>11</sup>*Gardista*, 17 December 1940.

crowns. In the following war years, the SOV did not continue with any of its activities, reappearing on the scene only as late as after the war.

In the re-established Czechoslovakia, Czech-Slovak relations were established on a new basis, in order not to repeat "Czechoslovakism," i.e., denying of the sovereignty of the Slovak nation. Equality of Slovaks and Czechs should have been ensured by two institutions - the Slovak National Council (SNR) as legislative body and the Representative Corps (ZP) as executive body. In the Czech part of the state, the appropriate bodies did not arise, so that there was an asymmetric model implemented in Czechoslovakia by the foundation of the federative state in 1968: exclusively Slovak officials assisted the state bodies (i.e., the government and parliament).

When CSOV resumed its activity in May 1940, it automatically related its authority to Slovakia also. It is therefore logical that the Ministry of Home Affairs permitted its activity on 27 June 1945, under the condition that, "The eventual commencement of activities also in the territory of Slovakia will necessarily be announced in advance to the Representative Corps for Internal Affairs of the Slovak National Council in Bratislava."<sup>12</sup>

Meanwhile, the struggle for legislative acknowledgement of the SOV by the SNR continued. On 25 May 1945, the chairman of the "Slovak parliament," JUDr. G. Husak, submitted a proposal, SNR regulation no. 51/1945, on "The Foundation and Dissolution of Associations" to the plenary session. According to this proposal, all associations that had collaborated with the previous pro-Fascist regime should be dissolved, while the others (including sports ones), ". . . if truly not related to political institutions, may continue to exist, and are obliged to modify their bye-laws in accordance with democratic principles and present them to the plenum."<sup>13</sup>

An association that had not presented modified bye-laws within the determined time limits, would be deemed to be dissolved.<sup>14</sup> In an amendment to this regulation, all associations and their branches that were not dissolved were enumerated. The SOV, however, was not included in this list.

On 26 October 1945, the chairman of the SNR applied to the Representative Corps with a request for the lists of the dissolved associations, approved associations, and associations asking for re-establishment.<sup>15</sup> The SOV was again not included in any of the enumerated categories.

The SOV failed to meet the stated time period and presented its new bye-laws as late as on 7 December 1945. There were only negligible modifications in the bye-laws and the request reads: ". . . it is not necessary to substantially modify any of the provisions of the bye-laws in accordance with the present situation, as our association has been, and still is, strictly apolitical, following solely and exclusively the fulfillment of Olympic Ideals."<sup>16</sup>

The late request was obviously not honored by the Representative Corps, but the former officials of the SOV received a ruling on its dissolution as late as on 20 September 1947. Apart from being erased from the association register, it was ordered to dissolve the whole property, but there was a note in the explanation of the erasure from the register stating that the association was indeed desirable and it could be re-established, present new bye-laws, and demand the restitution of the property.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>12</sup>Slovak National Archives (Slovensky narodny archiv - SNA). Bratislava, Fund of the PV, Associations, ch. 39.

<sup>13</sup>SNA Bratislava, Fund of the Office of the Slovak National Council, Minutes of the Plenary Session of the Slovak National Council of 25 May 1945.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid.

<sup>15</sup>SNA Bratislava, Fund of the PV, Associations, ch. 33.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., ch. 139.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., ch. 139.

The SOV did not take this opportunity, probably because of the fact that the representatives of Slovakia had been co-opted to the CSOV in the interim. The property of the SOV was confiscated on 2 April 1948 for the benefit of the cultural-social fund.

The question of the legality of the post-war SOV can be interpreted also in another way, from the point of view of the SUSR. As the bye-laws of the SOV, submitted late to the Corps of Internal Affairs, were not officially disapproved within the period of 40 days, the SUSR deemed this to have been approved.

The objections against the activities of the CSOV from the Slovak side were well-founded, because several CSOV officials stayed committed to Czechoslovak ideology. At the session on 26 January 1946, the CSOV concluded that Slovaks were represented "... in the CSOV via sports associations. We cannot enter into any separate agreements beyond the authority of the leaders of these associations."<sup>20</sup>

The CSOV did not directly contact the SOV, but the problems were solved through the mediations of the Czechoslovak Physical Training Associations (ceskoslovensky teleovychovny svaz - CSTZ), which was founded in November 1946 and in which the Slovaks had relatively adequate representation. The SUSR addressed the leadership of the CSTZ by a letter of 9 May 1947, in which it expressed its opinion on the legality of the post-war existence of the SOV (as the bye-laws were not disapproved within the period of 40 days) and complained that the Czech Olympic Committee had invoked a plenary session in the year 1947, in which it had changed its name to the Czechoslovak Olympic Committee without the agreement of the Slovak side. It demanded the convocation of a common meeting in order to establish the CSOV.<sup>21</sup>

In the next letter, of 19 May, the Slovaks proposed the date 1 June for this meeting, where Slovakia would be represented by Dr. L. Brezny and Dr. L. Okolicany.<sup>22</sup> The Czech side accepted this proposal at the third meeting of the executive committee of the CSOV on 21 May. The common meeting took place on the proposed day, but we still do not have its precise result at our disposal. According to the Czech historian Kössl, the CSOV put through its further existence and Slovak representatives were coopted into it.<sup>23</sup> Slovakia was represented on the CSOV by JUDr. L. Brezny, as vice-chairman of the CSOV, Dr. J. Chovan, R. Holcer, V. Kocum, Dr. A. Chovanec, and Dr. A. Lisicky.<sup>24</sup>

In June 1947 a session of the IOC was held in Stockholm. Apart from the chairman of the CSOV, JUDr. J. Gruss, JUDr. L. Brezny also took part in it with the goal of nominating a second representative to Czechoslovakia on the IOC - a Slovak. It is likely that on this occasion he received IOC President Edström's promise, that if it were possible, the IOC would try to nominate a Slovak representative at the following session of the IOC.<sup>25</sup> According to a

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<sup>18</sup>Ibid., Minutes and List of the Property of SOV.

<sup>19</sup>Letter of the SUSR to the Czechoslovak Physical Training Association of 5 May 1947. SUA Prague, Fund of the CSOV.

<sup>20</sup>SUA Prague, Fund of the CSOV. Jirí Kössl is quoted, "The majority of the officials of the CSOV agreed with the Slovak representation, but it did not overcome its Czechoslovak opinions. One of the main barriers to direct Slovak participation was the associative form of the CSOV that had been further enforced by the officials. In this way, however, they broke the regulation of the Ministry of Internal Affairs from the year 1945, as they re-started the activities of the CSOV at the state-level without the approval of the Slovak National Council." In: Kössl, J.: *Dejiny ceskoslovenskeho olympijskeho hnuti (History of the Czechoslovak Olympic Movement)*, Olympia Prague, 1977, p. 101.

<sup>21</sup>SUA Prague, Fund of the CSOV, ch. 25.

<sup>22</sup>Letter of the SUSR to the CSTZ, 19 May 1947. Ibid.

<sup>23</sup>Kössl, J.: c.d., p. 102.

<sup>24</sup>Archiv Musea tel. vchovy a sportu (AMTVS - Archives of the Museum of Physical Training and Sport). Inheritance of J. Gruss.

<sup>25</sup>Cas, June 30, 1947.

statement made by a member present at the IOC and the chairman of the SOV, Prof. V. Cernusak, the records of the IOC from the year 1947 show evidence that Slovakia was also enumerated among the requests for new members to be coopted; however, in further records Slovakia (contrary to other countries asking for acceptance) is no longer listed.<sup>26</sup>

The co-opted representatives of Slovakia applied to the CSOV in a letter of 31 October 1947, requesting to organize a plenary session on 15 November, where Slovak participation in the CSOV would be officially ratified.<sup>27</sup> This letter induced another round of negotiations and correspondence, including a request for the opinion of the Ministry of Inner Affairs. But in the end, the plenary session was not convocated.

The letter of 3 December 1947 from the CSOV, addressed to L. Brezny informed him that all Slovak requests were accepted at the meeting of the executive committee of the CSOV on 26 November, at which the decision of the presidential meeting on 19 November was confirmed. At the same time, L. Brezny became a member of the delegation for the Olympic Winter Games in St. Moritz for 1948.<sup>28</sup> After the take-over in February 1948, the Slovak representatives were replaced on 8 July 1948 (Dr. K. Stranai, MUDr. J. Chodak, Dr. V. Cicmanec, Dr. R. Holcik, R. Holzer, B. Kobza, V. Kocum, M. Poloni).<sup>29</sup>

After 1948, totalitarianism also appeared in the sphere of sport, not excluding the Olympic Movement. CSOV, as an association with legal subjectivity was dissolved on 23 July 1949, and its organization and personnel incorporated into a structure of new sports bodies. With regard to the centralism and international politics of the communist regime, the question of Slovak participation in the CSOV has never been discussed, perhaps with the exception of the short period after the approval of the Act on Federative Arrangement of Czechoslovakia (approximately in 1968-1973).

After the fall of the authoritarian regime in 1989, the question of resolving the national Czecho-Slovak relations also emerged in the Olympic sphere. The efforts of Slovakia in visualizing itself as an independent state were accompanied not only by the understandable aspiration of the Slovak side, but also by expressions of excessive nationalism on one side, and were opposed by the partial misunderstanding of these aspirations on the Czech side. The foundation of the Olympic Association of Slovakia (OSS) on 4 April 1990, established, as a subsidiary of the Slovak sports associations, Slovak Olympians, a group of important personalities of the society and people supporting the Olympic Movement and expressing the Slovak ambitions. An active participant at the 1968 Olympic Games, Dr. Maria Mracnova-Faithova, became the chairman of the OSS.

On 16 October 1990 the OSS decided to transform itself into the Slovak Olympic Committee. The IOC, however, did not accept this step, as, according to the Olympic Charter, several National Olympic Committees cannot exist in one state (which the CSFR was at that time). The original title remained and the OSS became an autonomous part of the CSOV. In connection with its program, the OSS adopted as its main role the development of Olympic ideas in the Slovak part of the Czecho-slovak Federative Republic.

The Slovak Olympic Committee had been founded shortly before the split of the CSFR. The preparatory committee convocated an establishing session of the SOV on 12 December 1992. At present, the SOV consists of representatives of 32 sports associations, nine important sportsmen/Olympians, as well as eight representatives of public administration and other institutions. Vladimir Cernusak, member of the IOC, is the president of the SOV, Jan Mráz is the general secretary. The executive committee of the IOC accepted the SOV as a preliminary

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<sup>26</sup>Material from Roundtable 1992, contribution by V. Cermak.

<sup>27</sup>SUA Prague, Fund of the CSOV, ch. 4 and 26.

<sup>28</sup>AMTVS Prague, Fund Gruss, ch. 5.

<sup>29</sup>SUA Prague, Fund of the CSOV.

member of the IOC on 16 March 1993, and confirmed it as a regular member at its 101st Session in Monaco on 24 September 1993.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>30</sup>Official booklet of the Slovak delegation for the Olympic Winter Games of 12-27 February 1994, Lillehammer. Slovak Olympic Committee 1993., p. 5