

BOOK REVIEWS

OTTO, DER SELTSAME - Die Einsamkeit eines Mittelstreckenläufers-Otto Peltzer (1900-1970),

By Volker Kluge. Published by Parthias Verlag GmbH, Uhlandstraße 28, 10719 Berlin, Germany (2000). 168 pages, in German. ISBN 3-932529-74-X. Price: DEM 38.00, (Euro) 19.43. Reviewed by Wolf Lyberg.

The wizard (or champion) in writing exciting sports literature has done it again! I read the 165 pages of this book non-stop, as like a first class novel by my favourite author Wilbur Smith. Impossible to stop reading when one has started. The only 'flop' with this book is that it has been published in the German language only.

I suppose that even some of the more experienced members of the ISOH must be thinking by themselves: "Who was Otto Peltzer in the first place?"

No wonder, when in these times even the most highly regarded sportsfans seem to forget the heroes of old times.

Even in my own country, a panel of experts (sic?) did not manage to get Gunder Hägg in its "centuries-best-list".

Kluge is a fantastic teller of sportstories. He makes every line interesting and in this book he excels as he, during his research, found the thick handwritten diaries of Peltzer; also read many of Peltzer's books, some of which were so popular in his time that they were printed in six editions!

Kluge also found unique photographs from Peltzer and his upper-class family, even his accreditation-card (ID-card) as an athlete in the 1932 Olympic Games in Los Angeles and his press-cards for the 1956 Olympic Games in Melbourne.

Peltzer had a complex personality. He was perhaps the first intellectual athlete, a pedagogue and researcher, receiving doctorates in several universities. He was a thorn-in-the-flesh not only to the bureaucratic German sportofficials, but also to the Nazi-government, which did everything possible to stop him from pursuing his alleged "hellenic inclinations" in his contacts with youth, a result perhaps of his interest in massage, which he learned from the

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Finnish masseur of Hannes Kolehmainen (the famous Finnish long distance runner).

Homo-sexuality was among the worst qualities anybody in Germany could be accused of. Peltzer was twice convicted to a one and a half year sentence in prison. The first time just before the Berlin Olympic Games in 1936, but he was vehemently protesting his first conviction, which he thought was a provocation. He was released before the Berlin Games and used this free period to contact many old sportsfriends from abroad.

Peltzer took a very tough stand and was very critical of many German sportsofficials, and, for example, as captain of the German Olympic team for the 1932 Olympic Games in Los Angeles, he accused the leadership of the 1932 team of giving them bad food and lodging, whereas they lived in luxury on the outbound ship.

He even was at odds with Carl Diem, already quite a force in the German sports-officialdom.

As an athlete, Peltzer - known by his contemporaries as the "Stork" because of his long legs - was one of the foremost, the very top of the bill. In 1926, he beat the world record in the 880 yards (and the 800 metres) at Stamford Bridge (in 1:51.6) and trounced the Olympic champion Douglas Lowe. They became good friends and Lowe was a great help to Peltzer in his later days.

But his greatest performance came on September 11th, 1926, when he beat both Paavo Nurmi and Edwin Wide in the 1500 metres race in Berlin, again annihilating a world record, held by Nurmi, in 3:51.0.

Peltzer had a fantastic finish and during the race could follow up almost any increase of speed by the other athletes. Not even Nurmi managed to hold him and he even passed Wide - who in this race had seemed to be a certain winner - in the last forty metres.

Peltzer many times has been accused of being a professional, but each time he was cleared as he always could proof that he had only accepted money that was permitted according to the then valid rules for amateurs.

The famous Tex Richard once offered him 250,000 dollars if he would accept to run exhibition races in connection with baseball- and rugby games. But Peltzer declined.

He had new ideas on training, much discussed and later accepted by many famous coaches.

He himself acted as a coach in China, Iran, Australia and could have been the national coach in Finland. But he had to leave the country, when war broke out with the Soviet-Union - and he departed for Sweden, ill.

In Sweden, he was hospitalized at the Serafimer Hospital and treated by the worldfamous professor Nanna Schwartz.

After his release from the hospital, he stayed in Sweden as coach for a wellknown club - and he wrote articles in the Swedish press.

In those days, I had just started as a young journalist at the *Idrottsbladet* and as part of my job, I was asked to translate his articles in Swedish. I had to smile when I read the one in which Peltzer made the statement that Mario Lanzi from Italy was a better runner than Rudolf Harbig, the German runner. This was one of the most controversial articles he wrote and the Germans were furious about it and I was the one who translated it for Peltzer.

I saw Peltzer practically every day. He was a very unlucky man, without any money and possessions; almost always hungry and nabbing left-over cream and sugar from the coffee-trays, after everybody had left.

When Kluge asked me to assist him in his search for interesting materials from the period 1940-1941, when the German government tried everything possible to have Peltzer expelled from Sweden to Germany, I of course agreed. I found much interesting materials in the police-archives. Peltzer was suspected to be an agent for the Nazi's, but the police-archives cleared him from that suspicion.

It is/was incredible to read this drama and the thoroughness of the security-police, which finally had him expelled back to Germany.

He was met by the SS-police when he arrived in

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Stralsund and taken into custody. They took him to the infamous Mauthausen internmentcamp, where he spent the next four years.

When reading the treatment he received from the SS-wardens, it made me shudder. He was beaten with a bat, loosing all his teeth; he was forced to carry stones weighing 25-40 kilos up a 150 metre high hill for eight hours at a stretch, being beaten by the wardens all the way up and down the hill.

He was also forced to work as a "slave" in the Siemens factory. When finally the Germans surrendered and the Americans came and freed him, he was just flesh and bones and had to stay in hospital for four months after his liberation. Six months after his liberation he ran the 5000 metres in 17:28.....!

Kluge also describes his ten years in India as an extremely successful coach. In 1967 he had a severe heartattack and was taken into hospital. He returned from the hospital in December 1967, only to be able to follow the continued sporting successes of his many Indian pupils, the so called "Peltzer boys". He had to take leave of them, many of them crying, and knowing he would never return.

He returned to Germany because his health continued to decrease.

On August 11th, 1970, he coached his favourite pupil in a 1500 metre race in Eutin. The boy won. Peltzer then decided to take a walk. He disappeared in the nearby woods and then died on the path, still with his stopwatch hanging around his neck.

These are just a few things, quickly remembered. But what a personality he was: "Der Seltsame Otto".

Really an exceptional man. What a pleasure it was to read in Kluge's book that the German Track and Field Federation created a special Peltzer commemorative medal in 1999, to be handed over to athletes and officials who have contributed to the successes of German track and field in general. A fitting tribute to this fine athlete.