

LUCKY WOUND

By Wojciech Zablocki

Many Polish Olympians lost their lives during the Second World War.

Perhaps the most famous of them all was Janusz Kusocinski, Olympic gold medallist, who broke the Olympic record in the 10,000 meter run during the Games of the Xth Olympiad in Los Angeles in 1932. Kusocinski was murdered after severe torture by the Gestapo in 1941 in Warsaw for his connections with the Polish Underground Resistance Army.

As far as I know, most of the German Olympians in those days did not want, or could not take a stand with regard to giving help to their former Polish Olympic friends.

Generally speaking they all accepted Hitler's lines from "Mein Kampf".

Even Carl Diem, in an article in the Reichssport Blatt, published in Berlin, on 25 June 1940, wrote under the title: STURMLAUF DURCH FRANKREICH:

"Sportbegeisterte Soldaten, sportbegeisterte Offiziere, sportbegeisterte Führer!"

"So kam es zum Sturm auf durch Polen, Norwegen, Holland, Belgien und Frankreich, zum Siegeslauf in ein besseres Europa!"

Fortunately, there were a few exceptions.

This is the exciting story of Leon Koza-Kozarski, a fencing coach from Poznan. He visited me in 1968 and then told me a strange story; a strange fragment of his life.

At the time I was, from time to time, writing about fencing, and therefore he wished me to know this story for possible use in later years. Unfortunately, the next year he died.

This is what Leon Koza-Kozarski told me:

In 1936, I was sent to Berlin to attend the Games of the XIth Olympiad as a coach of the Polish sabre fencing team. We lived in the Olympic Village at Döberitz, in small nice houses.

Every day, I organised a training for my team in a big hall called the HINDENBURGHAUS, which was quite close to our accommodations.

Four days before the start of the sabre tournament, we had an accident. During my fencing lesson with our best sabre competitor of those days Antoni Sobik from Katowice, the blade of my sabre broke and the sharp end of the sabre entered Sobik's right hand.

Immediately, we ran to the first aid post. There, a tall, handsome German doctor looked after Sobik's hand with utmost care. He took Sobik away for X-rays, and later dressed his wound twice a day. Fortunately, the broken blade had found its way just between the most vital parts of Antoni's wrist and did not harm him too) much.

After two days of intensive care and healing, Sobik could return to our training sessions,

much to my relief.

Everybody was of the opinion that the Polish sabre team would have a chance of winning the bronze medal - behind the invincible Hungarian and the brilliant Italian teams. But our fencers were more ambitious. They wanted to beat the Italian team too.

Unfortunately, they lost after a hard and exciting match, but then they were too tired and disappointed to give a real strong opposition against the theoretically weaker German team in the match for the third place and the bronze medal.

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September [1939], my
regiment tried to stop the
German attack near the
western border of Silesia."

Our best sabre fencer, Antoni Sobik, entered the final bouts of the individual tournament. In these times there were eight fencers placed in the final pool. He finally finished in seventh place.

In September 1939 the German Army invaded Poland.

During those terrible days in September, my regiment tried to stop the German attack near the western border of Silesia. We fought in the forest, and I had so few Polish soldiers available, that I had to place them at a distance of every fifty metres.

When the German infantry would approach too close, I would command with a high voice: "Place bayonets"!

The placing of bayonets on rifles gives a very characteristic sound, and usually German troops then stopped advancing, not wanting to risk "hand to hand"-fighting. Then, we would rapidly change the positions in our line.

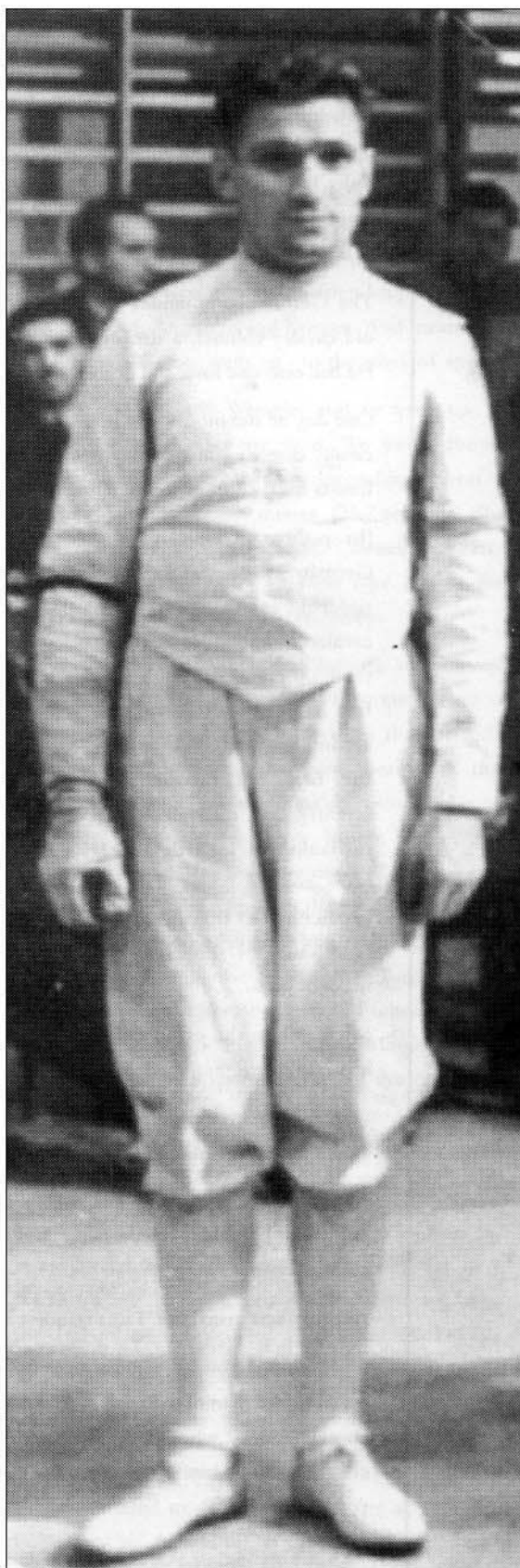
However, our situation constantly grew worse, because of the superiority of the German Army.

On September 17th, 1939, most of our officers were killed in a bombing attack and I was left over to command three regiments.

By September 20th, we were completely encircled, but with the remainder of three companies I tried to break through the German lines. My soldiers were already too tired from three days of intensive fighting, and our counter attack was annihilated by enemy machine guns.

I was lying quietly among the victims, feigning to be dead, but when a young German soldier kicked me hard in my back, I uttered a cry and was taken prisoner.

My ability to speak fluent German then saved me. I was interrogated several times by a fat Bavarian guy, who wanted to press me in signing a so-called "folkliste", in order to declare my German origins.



Antoni Sobik, 1936 Polish fencer

When I refused to sign, they sent me to the worst prisoner-of-war camp in Fort Hohenstein, in the Owl Mountains. This was a camp where "unwanted" Polish officers were mentally and physically abused, with the intention to "break" them down. Living conditions in the camp were really unbearable and only because of my knowledge of the German language and my appointment as a translator, I was able to survive.

The German commander of our small camp was an old cavalry colonel, a dreadful and merciless person. He had only one love: the cavalry!

One day, he summoned the Polish officers, who led the cavalry charge against the German invading tanks in the forests of Tuchola and congratulated them heartily.....!

[In reality, this cavalry charge was aimed at the German infantry and not against the tanks, which suddenly appeared on the battle-scene. The Polish cavalry regiment did not stop their horses, although the first line was shot down. The second line arrived close after the first, cut through the infantry and then destroyed the tanks with grenades]. This old colonel was always predicting the future renaissance of the cavalry in modern wars.....

My health in the camp constantly deteriorated and I was quite sure that I would not survive another year.

One day, our commander suddenly commanded us to assemble in the small court-yard..

Apparently, our camp was being visited by an important military commission with generals and colonels.

As the official translator, I was standing in the front row.

After some routine questions and the obligate answers, the row of officials was going to pass on to another camp, when all of a sudden one of the colonels stopped in front of me and asked: "What are you doing here?"

I shivered from fear I would be recognized by a German from my native city of Poznan, where in 1918, I participated in the Polish Uprising. That would have meant instant death for me.

"Don't you recognize me?" insisted the young tall German colonel.

At that moment, I really recognized him! He was this handsome doctor, who had treated and healed Antoni Sobik's hand, just before the sabre tournament in Berlin, during the Olympic Games in 1936.

He murmured: "I can not speak to you now. I will do my best to have you transferred to a better place."

And indeed, after a few weeks, I was sent to another military POW camp in Murnau, where living conditions were much better.

I am sure that I owed this transfer, and my life, to that German doctor, whom I did not meet again, nor did

I ever found out what his name was.

After the war, in 1945, I again met my former sabre pupil Antoni Sobik. He was as strong as ever and renewed his fencing training with me.

"Show me your hand", I said to him.

This he did, saying: "Do you

remember how you wounded me in Berlin? We were both lucky that it was nothing serious and that I could again compete two days later."

I smiled, and said: "You are perfectly right - it really was a lucky wound!"

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