

Notes, Documents, and Queries

New Light on the Nazi Olympics

*William J. Baker**

In the Berlin Olympics of 1936 German efficiency and Nazi ideology combined to produce an event of extravagant pageantry, competitive excitement, and political purpose. Through Richard D. Mandell's *The Nazi Olympics* (New York: Macmillan, 1971), sports historians know the story well. Recently, however, two new facets of the Nazi Olympics have unexpectedly come to light in Doug Gilbert's *The Miracle Machine* (New York: Coward, McCann & Geoghegan, 1980), a sympathetic assessment of the Communist sports system in East Germany. A Canadian journalist, Gilbert gathered his information primarily by visiting, observing, and interviewing numerous athletes and sports officials in the German Democratic Republic (GDR). In good journalistic fashion he stumbled onto a couple of gems relating to the Olympics of '36 that had been buried from the view of the historian Mandell.

One involved an obscure German wrestler, Werner Seelenbinder. A Communist by conviction, Seelenbinder detested the Nazis to such a degree that he originally planned not to compete on the German team in the '36 Games. Party friends convinced him, however, that such withdrawal would have no effect on world opinion. They urged him to compete, to win a medal, and on the victory stand to salute Hitler with a vulgar finger sign rather than the Nazi salute. Then, they insisted, he could hold an international press conference and explain to the world what he thought of his country's fascist government. Presumably Seelenbinder and his friends were fully cognizant of the probable dire consequences of their plan.

The scheme misfired when Seelenbinder, reputedly the best wrestler in his weight division, lost his first match. Apparently the pressure got to him. He recovered his composure sufficiently to finish fourth in the competition, but thereby barely missed his chance to make a political gesture that would have stood in shocking contrast to the sychophantic salutes of the other German

*Mr. Baker is an Associate Professor in the Department of History at the University of Maine, Orono, Maine.

medalists. One can reasonably conjecture that Seelenbinder's protest—which in time would have surely been regarded as a courageous, though crude, gesture for humanity—might well have removed some of the onus from the later black-power salutes of John Carlos and Tommie Smith in the Mexico City Olympics of 1968.

In failure Seelenbinder saved his skin, but not for long. When the War began he was arrested, and in 1944 was executed in Brandenburg concentration camp. Today in East Germany he is looked upon as a hero. The major indoor sports facility in Berlin, Seelenbinder Hall, is named in his honor, as is the bell tower at Leipzig Stadium that tolled the lighting and extinguishing of the flame for the Sixth National Sports and Gymnastics Festival in 1977. Doug Gilbert attended that event, learned of the Seelenbinder story, and now conveys it to Western readers (pp. 16-17). Whatever embellishments his East German hosts might have given to the facts, it is a good story filled with human poignancy as well as political significance.

Of greater historical interest is the story behind the 1936 men's Olympic Village in Döberitz, just outside Berlin. Mandell placed it "in a birch forest and near some small lakes beyond the western suburbs of Berlin," then described in vivid detail its efficient layout, sensible facilities, and (once the athletes arrived) sociable atmosphere. "Of course," he concluded, "the housing for the male athletes in Berlin was devised not only for their benefit, but for purposes of putting the new regime in a good light" (pp. 88-91). Apparently without access to the site itself, and certainly without the Soviet-controlled records at his disposal, Mandell had no way of knowing that the Olympic Village served a purpose of more sinister import than mere Nazi showmanship.

Doug Gilbert stumbled onto the truth "partly by accident and partly through reportorial persistence"—especially the latter (pp. 210-14). For years he had been fascinated with various Olympic villages, and envisaged the 1972 Games in Munich (which he covered for the *Montreal Gazette*) as an opportunity to satisfy his curiosity about Doberitz. Red tape strangled his hopes. He applied to the GDR foreign office for a one-day visitor's visa, but received no reply. A year later he and a Yugoslavian contact with the higher echelons of GDR sport both wrote to the GDR National Olympic Committee, but still without response. Then, while attending an Olympic Congress in Varna, Bulgaria, Gilbert met a high-ranking GDR sports official at a cocktail party, and was promised a visa to Döberitz. Yet again his hopes were dashed. He was informed officially that the Olympic Village had been destroyed during the War, an evasion that was reversed the next day to a further prevarication that though parts of the Village survived, all the old temporary buildings had been replaced by new structures, making a personal visit pointless.

Gilbert dismissed the matter from his mind until the spring of 1975, when in Montreal he told of his futile efforts to Klaus Huhn, the sports editor of *Neues Deutschland*. Finally the truth came out. Scarcely able to suppress a grin at the incongruity of Gilbert's attempt to gain admission to Döberitz, Huhn reported that the former Olympic Village is now a major Soviet military installation. For his own research into the Nazi Olympics, Huhn himself had been given special security clearance to view the site. More importantly, he had been permitted access to the records of the Third Reich's 23rd Infantry unit at Potsdam, the home base of the army engineers who constructed the Village in 1936. According to Huhn, the documents reveal that the Olympics served as a cover for secret Nazi military preparations. People described as "civilians" inhabited the Village before the athletes arrived; political pamphlets advertised Döberitz as "the Village of Peace." But in fact the Village was a training camp for the Condor Legion, the dive-bombing pilots who led the German military intervention in the Spanish Civil War. Moreover, some evidence suggests that the "peaceful . . . , quiet, idyllic lake" described by Mandell (pp. 89-90) also served briefly as a secret submarine training center. Mandell's commentary on Leni Riefenstahl's depiction of the Olympic Village takes on an ironic twist:

In the prelude [of the film *Olympia*], a pastoral metaphor of dawn, consisting of closeups of dewy grass and chirping insects, gradually broadens to a survey of the Olympic Village. Youths jog with long strides along a lakeside path lighted with shafts of sunlight filtered through mist and foliage. . . . Everyone fraternizes. The Olympic Village is a success (p. 265).

A success, yes, but not simply in terms readily apparent.

Yet the truth is not surprising. Though Gilbert concludes that the use Hitler made of the Olympic Village "certainly stands as one of the most cynical political contraventions of the Olympic ideal ever unearthed" (p. 214), this new gleam of light on the Nazi Olympics merely confirms our prior impressions. At the back side of Hitler's public orchestrations were shadows dark and deep wherein fascist ambition bode ill for Germans such as Werner Seelenbinder as well as for the rest of the world.