

The North American Gymnastic Union (NAGU) Normal College as an Example of the Influences of the German System of Gymnastics Teachers' Training on the North American System of Gymnastics Teachers' Training

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In the following abstract I will rely mainly on selected literature from contemporary German specialized journals of the second half of the 19th century. These are especially the *Neue Jahrbücher für die Turnkunst* (established in 1855), the *Deutsche Turnzeitung* (established in 1856), and the *Monatsschrift für das Turnwesen* (established in 1882). On the basis of the relevant articles in the most common scholarly journals, the lively participation and the didactic-methodical influences on the training of gymnastics teachers in North America can be retraced from a German perspective.

A comparison of the distribution of subject matter in the curricula of the NAGU Gymnastics Normal College and the Prussian Training School reveals surprising parallels concerning the exercises. While the content, and to some extent also the theory-practice ratio, was nearly identical, the North American college showed a remarkable rise in the number of lessons and tasks. The adaption of the German way of teaching gymnastics constitutes an indirect influence on the North American system of training gymnastics teachers. This influence can also be seen in the theoretical lessons. However, with increasing consolidation the North American educators significantly expanded the theoretical basis. In addition to the subjects already established, such as history, medicine, apparatus instruction, anatomy, and physiology, the subjects cultural history of mankind, German and English language, literature, chemistry, physics, psychology, and even popular singing were also introduced (Ueberhorst, H. 1978; *Turner unterm Sternenbanner*, München 1978, p. 33; and Zeigler, E.F. "Professional preparation courses of the Normal College of the American Gymnastic Union: 1866-1919" *Canadian Journal Of History Of Sport* 18, 1987, pp. 19-35).

Until the turn of the century the NAGU regarded the German Training Schools for Teachers of Gymnastics as a model. Soon afterward, however, the internal training structures started to consolidate and the spatial and material conditions were greatly improved. In Germany the esteem of the American Gymnastics Teachers' College rose significantly. Thus Thiemer, who knew the American school system very well, praised the American system enthusiastically in a comparative study of training schools for teachers of gymnastics in Germany and elsewhere, published in *Monatsschrift für das Turnwesen* in 1914:

... no German training regulation states so clearly what can and should be done at a training school for teachers of gymnastics; . . . it would certainly be rewarding for an expert to visit the institution. perhaps he would come back convinced that even in the training of gymnastics teachers America is superior to the Old World." (Thiemer, "Die Turnlehrerausbildung im Ausland und Inland" *Monatsschrift für das Turnwesen* 33, 1914, p. 54).

Now the roles of model and imitator had been inversed. North America had managed to catch up with the Old World and won the role of model for the German training of gymnastics teachers. In

addition to other factors this was due to the more restricted conditions of entry after 1910, which stipulated a certain level of general education and pedagogical knowledge.

Due to its reliance on the German model the college at first tried to restrict the influence of sports and to contravene the merging of elements of German gymnastics and American sports. The strong emphasis on German origins and German culture at the NAGU Gymnastics Teachers' College is significant, since at the same time the new exercise forms started to compete with those of the German gymnastics. This plan, however, seems not to have been successful. An infusion of American elements of sports into the practice of German gymnastics clearly was a consequence of the so called "sportive infiltration" of the whole gymnastics system in the USA. The following quotation from 1913 illustrates the consequences of the infiltration:

"Here the German gymnastics has been reduced to American sport and is practiced as such. The true spirit of gymnastics has been lost, as the results clearly show." (Staff, "Oktober 1911- Oktober 1912" *Jahrbuch der Turkunst* 7, 1913, pp. 173-177).

The fundamental resignation in this quotation reflects the same conservative attitude that so strongly burdened the relation of gymnastics and sports in Germany. The merging of elements of gymnastics and of American games and sports did not stop outside the Gymnastics Teachers' College. However, the American College accommodated itself to the gymnastic and sportive status quo much later than the German Training School. In my opinion the NAGU in this respect was much more conservative than their ideological ancestors in Germany. The contemporary assimilation of elements of the games and sports movement in Germany, therefore, did not influence the NAGU.

While the German Training Schools for Teachers of Gymnastics were criticized for their lack of academic principles and structures, which were seen as the reason for their lack in attraction, Thiemer could state in the same 1914 article that the institute in

"America is closer to 'academic' education than we are, because there almost the same credentials are demanded as are needed to enroll at a university" (Thierner, p. 52).

In this respect too the NAGU Gymnastics Teachers' College could distinguish itself from the training schools in Germany. In contrast to the Berlin Training School, the faculty in America were all university graduates. This situation was strongly contested in the scholarship at that time in Germany.