

The Former Eastern Provinces and the Sudetenland: German Olympic Athletes in Socio-Cultural Life and Politics Prior to 1945

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Sportculture in Pomerania East-Prussia, Silesia, and the Sudetenland was different from modern sport, being influenced by a unique landscape of social, economic and political processions, mentalities and a special group-consciousness. By the same token, sport was not subject to many excesses as reported in our times. On the other hand, there were growing national and ethnic tensions as well as class-differences at the end of the 19th and the first decades of the 20th century. There was a sharp confrontation, faced in hostility, between Slavic Sokol and German Turner Societies. All bourgeois sports organizations had a national background, too, whilst labor sports was oriented towards the working-class and ideologically based on Marxist principles.

The most famous athlete in Pomerania was Otto Peltzer, several-times German champion (1500m) as well as English, British and Australian champion. He was a member of S.C. Stettin and he beat Nurmi in Berlin 1926 and set a new world record in Paris 1927. An individualist and nonconformist, he was arrested by the Gestapo in 1941 and set free by the Americans in 1945.

The German equestrian team (1928, 1936) at the Olympics was trained by Gustav Rau, the well-known hippologe from Trakehnen, East-Prussia. Thanks to him German horsemen could place a leading position in horse-riding.

It was Gerhard Stock, who won the javelin competition 1936 in Berlin and Blask, who finished second in throwing the hammer, both from Konigsberg, now Kalliningrad. Shortly after the Berlin Olympics E. Emil Hirschfeld, an all-around athlete, had finished third in shot put and became world champion the same year.

Breslau, the capital of Silesia, was a centre of Jahn's Turnen during the War of Liberation 1813-15; a hundred years later, when modern sports facilities around the 'Jahrhunderthalle' (Centennial Hall) were built, Breslau became a centre of sports, too. Lina Radke-Batschauer from there was the first woman to win a gold-medal in the 800m race at Amsterdam 1928. Two gold medals had already been captured by Barthe/Breslau in 1912: 200m and 400m breast-stroke. Breslau took the lead in swimming at this time, then followed by Kattowitz. Since the Geneva Convention (1920) the town belonged to Poland.

The Sudetenland was a stronghold of German Gymnastics and in its national ideology it was a skiing-paradise already before World War I, when the country still belonged to Austria. Nevertheless, Hans Lahr and Gustl Berauer became skiing-idols, sportsmen of supreme adulation, when the Sudetenland was a part of the CSR. After the "Anschluss" (1938) both started for Germany. Berauer, who trained hard every day, won several international championships and four times nordic skiing, a combination of cross country racing and jumping. He was the best skier at this time and after the war, when he lived in Bavaria, he became the national coach of the German wintersports athletes. Briefly it can be stated: although gone, but not forgotten, there was a rich sportculture in the former German eastern provinces and the Sudetenland.