

Olympics behind barbed wire

By Maciej Nęciński and Volker Kluge

The poster of the exhibition "Olympics behind barbed wire", which can be seen until the end of the year in the Warsaw Olympic Centre. Among the objects shown is the competition programme of the "Olympic Games" in Woldenberg (excerpt).

Photos: Museum of Sports and Tourism, Warsaw



At the beginning of September 2014, the whole of Poland remembered the German invasion of 75 years ago, which at the same time marked the start of the Second World War. In 1939, some 420,000 Polish soldiers, of whom 19,000 were officers and 33 generals, became German prisoners of war. In addition around 200,000 civilians were also interned. A further 250,000 soldiers, including 18,000 officers, became Soviet prisoners of war from the middle of September after the advance of the Red Army into eastern Poland.

On 10th September, the Polish Museum of Sports and Tourism opened the doors on an exhibition entitled "Igrzyska za drutami" – "Olympics behind barbed wire" at the "Olympic Centre" of Warsaw (ul. Wybrzeże Gdyni 4). This runs till the end of the year and fits in well with this painful episode in the nation's history. It is dedicated to the 70th anniversary of the Olympic Games of 1944.

Olympics of 1944? Were they not cancelled? The Games which the IOC had awarded to London in 1939 certainly did not take place. And yet "Olympic Games" were

held in fact at the German prisoners of war camps in Pomerania, where mostly Polish officers were interned. In "Oflag II C" in Woldenberg (today the Polish town of Dobiegniew), the largest camp, there were about 6000 officers, and in "Oflag II D" in Gross Born (today Borne Sulinowo) around 5000.

On 27th July 1929, Germany had signed the third Geneva Convention on the treatment of prisoners of war. Essentially the National Socialist regime, which had come to power in 1933, held to the provisions of the Hague Regulations of 1907, whereby prisoners of war were to be treated exactly the same as the troops of the nation in whose custody they were held. This ruling applied in respect of food, accommodation and clothing. However, while Non Commissioned officers and ordinary soldiers were to earn their food through forced labour, the officers were spared this ordeal.

From 1940 the situation changed dramatically, when the status of prisoners of war was withdrawn from the interned Polish soldiers on the basis that their state no longer existed. To be sure they were released in the next



The flag created by Antoni Grzesik for the "Olympic Games" of 1944. The abbreviation "ROK 44 w II C" means "Olympic Year 1944 Woldenberg Oflag II C".

Photo: Museum of Sports and Tourism, Warsaw

two and a half years, but had to report within 24 hours to an employment office, which handed them over to a German employer. In this way the number of Polish prisoners of war sank to 55,000. This number was made up exclusively of officers.

To liven up the dull and miserable life of the camp there therefore arose in the officers' camps numerous "clubs" and social organisations. Directors organised theatre performances and under the direction of Józef Klitonowski, the conductor from Poznań, a symphony orchestra played in Woldenberg. Around 80 lecturers and teachers gave instructions, often at university level. Many

of the 1500 students received final certificates, which were recognised after the war by Polish universities.

The sporting events enjoyed great popularity, possibly because the group of prisoners included a large number of lecturers, graduates and students of the Warsaw Central College of Physical Education (today University of Physical Education) as well as graduates of the Sports Institutes in Poznań and Kraków. In Woldenberg alone there were six different sports clubs, which from 1940 to 1943 carried out an annual "Festival of Sport".

The highlight of 1944 was the "Olympic Games". These were held from 23rd July to 13th August in the "Olympic

Some 6000 Polish officers were imprisoned in the German POW Camp 'Oflag II C'. The camp had opened on 21st May 1941.

Photo: fotopolska.eu





A look into the exhibition curated by Agnieszka Fietkiewicz Zapalska. Below: the winners of the competitions in Gross Born received medals of cardboard, those in Woldenburg received diplomas (in the photo) for third place in the football tournament for Ryszard Konciewicz, the Polish national team manager from 1950 to 1970). The winning team of WKS Łwów in the 1943 volleyball tournament was honoured with a cup, made from a cooking pot.

Photos: Maciej Neczański; Museum of Sports and Tourism Warsaw



Stadium", one of the football pitches. There was the full Olympic ceremonial, including flag and "Olympic Fanfare". This was composed by Marian Frankiewicz, who was chosen as winner of the art competition in the music category. First prize in the literature section went to Jar Knothe, who had composed the poem "Olympic prayer". The architect Jerzy Hryniewiecki (together with Jerzy Staniszkis) was honoured for a poster, Edward Czarnecki for the design of a stamp showing a runner reaching the tape. The winners received medals made of cardboard as well as diplomas.

The sports programme consisted of athletics – football, volleyball, handball, basketball and boxing as well as the non-Olympic sport of chess. In order to guard against further attempts to escape (in 1943 around 150 officers in Woldenburg had tried to escape by tunneling under the barbed wire double fence which was two and a half metres high) contests in fencing, archery, pole vault and javelin were forbidden by the German authorities.

Among the 369 participants were several Olympians: the fencer Kazimierz Laskowski had won bronze in the sabre with his team in Amsterdam in 1923; Witalis Ludwiczak and Adam Kowalski-Roch were part of the Polish ice-hockey team finished fourth place at Lake Placid in 1932.



Although the German camp management in "Oflag II D" in Gross Born had issued orders which forbade the raising of an Olympic flag, the competitions from 30th July to 15th August were also held under the symbol of the five rings. These Games were somewhat smaller than those in Woldenburg, but they also served the aim of maintaining physical strength.

And that was the order of the day, for at the same time – on 1st August 1944 – the Polish Home Army (Armia Krajowa – AK), operating underground, dared to take the fight to an enemy which was overwhelmingly superior. They fought heroically for 63 days, until the Warsaw rising collapsed. About a hundred AK officers were deported to Woldenburg.

The Warsaw rising was documented by a lieutenant with the cover name of "Brok". It was the javelin thrower Eugeniusz Lokajski, who had come seventh at the Olympic Games in 1936 in Berlin. He died on 15th September 1944 under artillery fire.

How deep-rooted the Olympic idea was in Poland had been shown in 1940, when in the Stammlager (Stalag) XIII A Langwasser (near Nürnberg) "Olympic Games" took place from 31st August to 8th September. The "Olympic" competitors in "Oflag II B" in Arnswalde lasted three days – from 29th to 31st August 1940.

Although only a small exhibition space was available at the Warsaw museum, the abundance of material is overwhelming. The story is documented on 31 panels; 77 objects from five prisoner of war camps fill twelve glass display cabinets. The curator Agnieszka Fietkiewicz Zapalska was in the fortunate position of being able to have recourse to some contemporary witnesses.

The most significant of these is certainly the former company commander Arkady Brzezicki, who today rejoices in the Biblical age of 107. Originally from Chechnya, he emigrated to Poland after the First World War, where he studied sport in Warsaw and worked as sports teacher from 1932. Brzezicki, an active fencer (and in 1947 founder of the fencing section of WKS Legia Warsaw), was one of the organisers in Woldenburg. Of the others the engineer Antoni Grzesik (1909–1988) is worthy of special mention. His most important task was to win over the German camp management in favor of the project and keep them in a good mood. The lieutenant also belonged to the philately circle, which had set up a "camp postal service" at the start of May 1942, initially to facilitate the exchange of Easter greetings, a Polish tradition.

One of the 23 issues (in total 51 stamps as well as further philatelic products were produced) was dedicated to the "Olympic Games" of 1944. At the opening of the Games a postcard also appeared, which besides the five rings shows an athlete lying on the ground raising himself up with the Olympic torch in his hand. On the special cancellation stamp, bombers and ruins can be recognised, above which the Olympic flag rises. This was created by



Boxing matches in 1944 in one of the Polish officers' camps. Below: handmade ashtray for the winner of the football tournament in Woldenberg. Adjacent: Olympic post from the officers' camps in Gross Born (above) and a decorated sheet with special issues from Woldenberg.

Photos: Maciej Necinski; Photos: Museum of Sports and Tourism, Warsaw; Volker Kluge Archive



Grzesik with the inscription "ROK 44 W II C", the symbol of the Games in Woldenberg.

The "Oflag" administration of Gross Born even managed to produce three special stamps and a block, despite the lack of paper. The stamps do have a primitive perforation, and they are unevenly gummed and show differing colour tones, but that is no wonder in view of the simple technical resources available to the prisoners.

The profits of the "Camp Postal Service" incidentally benefited the FWS Fund, which served to support the widows and orphans of the war. Until the camp was evacuated around 250,000 Marks were secretly transferred in this way to occupied Poland.

On 25th January 1945 there followed the decampment towards the West in six columns of part of the Woldenberg camp. The remaining 4000 prisoners in the other part of the camp was liberated by the Red Army on 30th January.

Two days earlier in Gross Born, more than 5000 prisoners of war had set off in bitter cold on the march westwards. This which did not end until eight weeks and 500 kilometres later in Lower Saxony. They had to wait until 5th May for their liberation by British troops.

A necessary consideration in hindsight: Even though it was possible for the Polish officers to organise "Olympic Games", no one should however believe that it can have been "not so bad". The 10,000 men who died in captivity bear testimony to the opposite view. In addition there existed some "show camps", which were used to deceive the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) about the true nature of conditions in the camps. Furthermore, it should be remembered that from the first day of the war, the Nazis conducted a merciless war of annihilation against the Polish Jews and the Red Army soldiers, which often ended only with their deaths. ■