

# Memorabilia: Lost and Found

By Volker Kluge

At the end of July, a kindergarten was being renovated in the community of Kleinmachnow in the south of Berlin. As a worker in the upper storey was tearing down an unnecessary wall, he came on a hollowed-out place in which a metal chest was hidden. After it had been forced open, the first reaction of those present was disappointment. No treasure – nowhere! The contents were merely an unassuming brown box, in which lay a gilded medal with the inscription “X<sup>th</sup> Olympiad Los Angeles 1932”. It was an Olympic gold medal.

The find set off a feverish gold prospector’s thought process. The head teacher of the kindergarten had found out that in 1932 Germany had only had three Olympic champions: Rudolf Ismayr (weightlifting), Jakob Brendel (wrestling) and the coxed fours. Logically the owner of the medal had to come from this circle of seven (That Germany had also won gold in the Art Competitions and in alpinism was unknown to her.)

Yet the woman proved she had a good nose for detective work when she thought it was most likely one of the oarsmen from the Berlin Rowing Club. Who of the victorious quintet was the rightful owner? As all four oarsmen and their cox were long since dead and as no-one else was lacking a gold medal, the only thing to do was to make the issue public. The very next day the question was answered.

Years before I had found out that one of the crew, Horst Hoeck, lived in Kleinmachnow and worked in the neighbouring town of Teltow. There he was manager of the BIOMALZ factory, which made tonic drinks from barley. Not much imagination is needed to imagine the panic which broke out among the inhabitants when in April 1945, the Red Army captured Berlin from the south. Then the word was: *Sauve qui peut!*

Under adventurous circumstances – there is talk of arrest and conviction – Hoeck escaped to the British sector of divided Berlin. From then on he ran a pub, which he had taken over from his father.

Even if he thought of the medal at all, it was impossible for the next two decades to search for it in the hiding

place, which was now in the territory of the GDR. The house, which had meantime been confiscated, had been used since 1960 as a kindergarten. To travel from the walled-in West Berlin to Kleinmachow, only a few kilometres away, a special permit was needed. Hoeck died in 1969 without any hope of ever recovering the medal. It is to be handed over to his eldest daughter after clarification of the legal issues. She reported that he had never complained about its loss.

## Independent experts wanted

One person’s loss, another’s gain. After the “sensational find” had been exhaustively discussed in the German media, a Berlin pensioner got in touch. He had inherited a 1936 medal from his father who had found it after the war during removal of rubble in the ruins of a house.



Now, after 70 years, the son wanted to give this relic back to its rightful heirs. It was slightly blackened by the fire storm so whether it is gold or bronze is still to be ascertained. This is likely to be difficult, as the details about the place it was found are so vague. But the search goes on!

That is also true of the Olympic diploma of 1896, whose chequered history

readers found in the last Journal (pp. 68–69). It is known that the grand-daughter of the German-Jewish Olympic gymnastic champion Felix Flatow, who died in 1945 in the concentration camp Theresienstadt, was selling the certificate through a Dutch auction house in the USA. However the purchaser soon sent it back, for once she had removed it from the frame, she established that it was merely a coloured copy. Three experts came to the same conclusion.

Now good advice is needed. Especially it has to be clarified as to who carried out this cunning swindle. It is unlikely that the late son of the Olympic champion could have exchanged a copy for the original. The few objects left by his father were punctiliously honoured by Stefan Flatow. His grand-daughter is also blameless. However it is also known that Flatow objects are occasionally lent out. Perhaps therein lies the solution to the puzzle.

Rare Olympic memorabilia has fetched remarkably high prices in the last few years. This brings problems of its own. There has already been a series of thefts. Also various forgeries have been and continue to be circulated. Independent experts are needed, competent enough to distinguish an original, (which should only be sold with a certificate of authenticity), from a copy. ■

The Olympic gold medal of Los Angeles 1932, which belonged to the German oarsman Horst Hoeck. At the end of the war it was interred in a house in a small town south of Berlin, until it was found again after 75 years during building works. One year after his Olympic victory Hoeck had joined the Reitersturm of the 6<sup>th</sup> SS standard. After the war he was interned by the Soviet military administration.

Photo: Gemeindeamt Kleinmachnow