

# 'Mistaken Identities' – Hedwig Rosenbaum the First Olympic Medallist from Bohemia

By Martin Pelc



Mixed doubles at the Olympic Games in Paris 1900. The original caption identifies the players as Archibald Warden and Kate Gillou. In fact, Warden teamed up with Hedwig Rosenbaum. They beat Gillou and Pierre Verdé-Delisle in the semi-finals.

Photo: La Vie au Grand Air

Tennis player Hedwig Rosenbaum was one of the first women to take part in the Olympic Games. At the 1900 Games in Paris, she was third in both the ladies singles and mixed doubles. As such she was one of the very first women to win an Olympic medal and is certainly the first from what is now known as the Czech Republic to do so. Until recently, though, little was known about her life, but this is her story.

## Introduction

Pierre de Coubertin came up with the concept of a specific "sporting geography" in 1911, noting that "there is an athletic geography that may differ at times from a political geography".<sup>1</sup> At that time it was disputed as to whether the Czech Olympic team should retain its separate position in Stockholm 1912. The Bohemian Lands (Bohemia, Moravia, Austrian Silesia) were still

a part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. They were represented by the Austro-Hungarian teams. A similar question arose with the Finnish Olympic team, because Finland was, at that time, a part of the tsarist Russia.

National historiographies and sports statisticians resolved the problem of (dis)continuity after 1918 by simply accepting the institutional succession, thus neglecting the qualitative identity changes that occurred. There is a strong tendency towards national historiography in the sub-discipline of sports history, just as it was the case in political history. It could however, be countered that there is a discrepancy between the retrospective analytical and the authentic historical categories.

Although Hedwig Rosenbaum was the very first woman from the Bohemian Lands to win an Olympic medal. It was not until 117 years after she had won her medals that the true facts about her were established. These discoveries in 2017 made this paper possible.<sup>2</sup>

However utilitarian it may seem at first glance, Coubertin's arguments for "sporting geography" might well receive some support from present-day scholars. According to Pierre Bourdieu's field theory, sport is a relatively autonomous social-spatial arena operating under specific rules. Just as in other fields (art, science, etc.), the relativity of its autonomy is determined by given political, economic, social or cultural borders. Nevertheless, its structure and autonomy is quite strong: unlike in art for example, there are written rules that must be respected, referees and other authorities who see to the fairness of the contest, and governing bodies that sanction formal and serious violations of the rules and regulations.<sup>3</sup>

The history of sport in Austria-Hungary shows many similarities with political development in the region. Parliamentary obstructions had their counterparts in various sport boycotts that haunted the Czech-German



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**Der Sportredakteur.**



Right: Dr. Siegfried Rosenbaum (Raabe-Jenkins), drawing by Emil Weiss.  
Left: *Der Sportredakteur* (Rosenbaum), cartoon, 1912.

Illustrations: Prager Tagblatt

relations within the monarchy. "Sport politics" was discussed by the Czech National Council (Národní rada česká) and advocated by such personalities as Karel Kramář and Zdeněk V. Tobolka, Young-Czech members of parliament.<sup>4</sup> Josef Václav Kaufmann, an influential Czech sports journalist, recapitulated the "thirteen years" struggle for Czech state rights to independence against Vienna in association football in 1910.<sup>5</sup>

On the other hand, Czech sport had achieved a more autonomous international position than any other field of the public life. Czech athletes were allowed to participate at the early Olympic Games as a separate team (because of the efforts of Jiří Guth who had been one of the founders of the IOC) from 1900 to 1912. Around 1910, sport was recognized as an important international factor and a far stricter institutionalisation started to threaten autonomous international representation in sport. It was unlikely that this autonomy would endure at the planned 1916 Games in Berlin. Diplomatic pressure from Vienna grew stronger and the Czechs were expected to be part of the Austrian team. There was a similar tendency in football and other sports, too.<sup>6</sup>

If there is a definable picture of Hedwig Rosenbaum in sports historiography, it has been centred around her Jewishness, an arbitrary point of view induced by post-holocaust scholars. As if it did matter that *some sources claim that Hedwig Rosenbaum, who won medals in singles and mixed doubles tennis in 1900 representing Bohemia, a Czech province of Austria-Hungary, was Jewish, and the first Jewish woman to win an Olympic medal.*<sup>7</sup>

Was this relevant or is it just one of the misleading identities that have been constructed around Hedwig Rosenbaum? It can be argued that it does not take into consideration her own sense of identity. Rather than Rosenbaum's lifeworld, it indicates the author's value system. This paper would like to correct this error by analysing hitherto unexamined archival and printed sources.

### Personal life

Hedwig Rosenbaum (the Czech form Hedvika Rosenbaumová was not used before 1945) was indeed of "Jewish" origin. She was born Hedwig Austerlitz on 3 July 1864 in Prague. Her father was the tradesman and entrepreneur Moses Austerlitz, her mother Rachel Austerlitz, née Mislav.

Rosenbaum was a member of the German-speaking Jewish minority of Prague. This was a community from which writers Franz Kafka and Franz Werfel emerged in the next generation. According to the census of 1890, there were almost 20,000 inhabitants (nearly 9% of the city's population) of Jewish faith in Prague.<sup>8</sup>

Older biographic dictionaries claimed Hedwig Austerlitz was born in 1880.<sup>9</sup> This is an error caused by confusion in interpretation of the sources. The Prague residents' registry lists two women of this name, born in 1880 and 1891.<sup>10</sup> Since the latter would be nine years old at the time of the 1900 Olympics, the former woman named (née Oesterreicher) was assumed to be correct. Many Olympic publications list her giving the incorrect biographical data 1880–1927.

In fact, Hedwig Rosenbaum the Olympic tennis player had changed her name by the time the residents' registry was compiled. This fact was recently established by historians.<sup>11</sup> They were able to clarify the correct facts with a simple check in the registry of marriages. Here the correct birth date can be found. However, her life story has remained unexplored.

Hedwig Austerlitz was born into a well-to-do family. Her father Moses was commonly described as a wholesale dealer (in German: *Großhändler*). As far as we know, there were four children: Robert (b. 28 November 1862), Hedwig (b. 3 July 1864), Melanie (b. 25 November 1868) and Ottilie (b. 1 November 1870).<sup>12</sup>

We know little about Hedwig's early years but on 28 March 1886, she was married in the Prague "Tempel".<sup>13</sup> Her husband Siegfried Rosenbaum, nicknamed "Bim" by his friends, was to become a "well-known figure" within the German-speaking community of Prague.<sup>14</sup> He was the most prominent German-speaking sports journalist in Bohemia. The writer Friedrich Torberg wrote of "numerous anecdotes associated" with him.<sup>15</sup>

Siegfried Rosenbaum was born in Vienna on 2 February 1860. He attended the preparatory school in Česká Lípa/Böhmisch-Leipa in North Bohemia and studied law at the Charles-Ferdinand University in Prague and possibly also in Dresden and Bonn between 1878 and 1884.<sup>16</sup> He became a legal clerk in Královské Vinohrady/Königliche Weinberge, today a part of Prague.

He even opened his own practice in Prague in the 1890s but was becoming increasingly involved in sport. He worked as a sports journalist for the *Prager Tagblatt*. He was a member of its editorial staff from 1893. He may have been the first professional sports journalist in the Bohemian Lands. As one of his obituaries put it, his life's work was the sports column in the *Prager Tagblatt*.

Siegfried Rosenbaum was an all-round sportsman himself. He was an enthusiastic cyclist, tennis player, fencer, jockey, motor sport expert and one of the first drivers in Prague. He was also an aviator, football official with the Deutscher Fußball-Club Prague, football and ice-hockey referee, head of the German Football Referees Association in Czechoslovakia, etc. He was also keen on water sports. In 1904, for example, he rowed from Prague to Hamburg in 16 days despite the low water level. He also produced one of the first translations of football and ice-hockey rules in Bohemia.<sup>17</sup>

However interesting Siegfried Rosenbaum's life may be, let us return to his enigmatic spouse. When do we lose track of Hedwig Rosenbaum? Things became complicated in the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In 1904, her husband Siegfried converted from Judaism to Roman-Catholicism. He was baptised at St. Henry's parish church in Prague. The same step may well have been taken by Hedwig herself.



Hedwig Raabe (Rosenbaum) in nursing uniform during First World War.

Photo: National Archives Prague

This was a common step taken by Austrian Jews who wished to better their chances in public life.<sup>18</sup> On 8 June 1909, the Lower Austria regional government approved the change of Siegfried Rosenbaum's name to Siegfried Raabe-Jenkins, an act that would have further concealed his Jewishness. Thereafter, his wife was known as Hedwig Raabe.<sup>19</sup> This change confused many sports historians. At the time of the 1900 Olympics she was a Jewish woman called Hedwig Rosenbaum, by 1910 she became a Roman Catholic known as Hedwig Raabe.

The search in Catholic Church registers is far more complicated because there were so many Prague parishes. That is why the date of Hedwig's death was not established until recently. Incidentally, Siegfried Rosenbaum's new name seems to carry a deeper meaning. Hedwig herself published a story entitled "Girl and a Tennis Match" in *Sport im Bild* magazine (Berlin) under the name Hedwig Raabe as early as 1898, well before the legal act of the name change was completed, and some of her translations used the same pseudonym.

What did Hedwig Rosenbaum-Raabe do outside of sport? Like many of her aristocratic and upper-middle-

class friends, she dedicated herself to public welfare and culture. She also volunteered as a nurse during First World War. The only known photograph shows her dressed in a nursing uniform.<sup>20</sup> City directories registered her as a "Private".

In 1916 she was mentioned as the owner of the regional liberal daily newspaper *Silesia* in Teschen/Těšín. This was a paper which had been published by her brother-in-law Heinrich Mercy. After his death in 1912<sup>21</sup> and the passing of Hedwig's sister in 1916, she took their place shortly at the newspaper. Siegfried and Hedwig Raabe were also made guardians of her sister's children between 1916 and 1919.<sup>22</sup> In the first half of the 1920s, she was officially an employee of her nephew's publishing house Heinrich Mercy Sohn. From 1921, she ran a shop selling arts and crafts materials, embroideries and handmade fabric. She exhibited her goods under the brandname Melviga.

Many in the circles in which she moved were Anglophiles. Her husband chose his new surname, Raabe-Jenkins, in honour of a well known British football player. He also visited England and spoke English.<sup>23</sup>

Hedwig Rosenbaum's admiration for England included art. She translated for the *Prager Tagblatt* – for example Mary Cholmondeley's novel *Moth and Rust* (1903).<sup>24</sup> Together with her husband she translated Pembroke Arnold Vaile's book *Modern Lawn-Tennis* (1905).<sup>25</sup> It is also likely she sometimes played under the name O. Wilkins. In Prague, her mixed doubles tennis partner was T. H. Nash and at the 1900 Olympics she played alongside Archibald Warden of Great Britain.

Her husband Siegfried died on 24 June 1925. They had had no children.<sup>26</sup> After this date, historians were unable to find any traces of Hedwig Rosenbaum-Raabe, though the Prague telephone directory registered a telephone number under her husband's name at the same address until 1939. To follow Hedwig's trail further, it is necessary to look at her siblings. Her youngest sister Ottilie married the owner of the *Prager Tagblatt* and other Heinrich Mercy newspapers. She had died in 1916. Her sister Melanie also played tennis. She married a man called Glaser and died in 1925.<sup>27</sup>

Rosenbaum's longest surviving sibling was her eccentric brother Robert Austerlitz. He started working as a sports journalist for the *Bohemia* newspaper in Prague, then he became editor of the feuilleton column for the *Prager Tagblatt*. He had been a goalkeeper in one of the earliest teams in Prague in the 1890s. He was also a passionate dancer, including modern dances like Charleston. Later he became the director of a weaving and spinning mill. In his final years, he pursued an artistic career. He made his debut as graphic designer at the Arts and Crafts Museum in Prague at the age of 70. A catalogue of his work was published in 1937. He died in the same year in Vienna.

An obituary in the *Deutsche Zeitung Bohemia* mentions a surviving sister Hedwig.<sup>28</sup> This significantly narrowed the scope of research. Eventually, her name was discovered in one of the death registers in Prague. She died on 31 July 1939 in Prague-Kleinseite (Malá Strana), on a street called Újezd, at the age of 75. This was shortly after the Nazi occupation of the Bohemian Lands but before their anti-semitic legislation took full effect.<sup>29</sup>

Since Hedwig Rosenbaum-Raabe had no children, little was known about her. After the Second World War there were only indirect heirs. Her brother's son lived in London in 1939 and renounced the heritage in favour of her nieces Mathilde Mimi Mercy-Weizenbeck-Benies (1897 Prague–1982 Munich) and Elisabeth Kunigunde Mercy Nostitz (1901 Prague–1983 Wiener Neustadt), who lived in the family castle Groß Kletzan/Klecany in 1939. Surprisingly, both were described as Aryan during the probate proceedings.<sup>30</sup> They inherited mainly furniture and jewellery.

Incidentally, Hedwig Rosenbaum's brother-in-law Max Benies (her niece Mathilde's second husband), was an outstanding rider.<sup>31</sup> He was prevented from taking part in the 1920 Olympics in Antwerp as a result of the Czechoslovak authorities' decision not to allow national minorities and Jews to represent the republic in the first Games after 1918. Although he was nominated by the Jockey Club, he was not allowed to join the Olympic team because the Czechoslovak Sports Union (Československá sportovní obec) refused to accept his nomination unless evidence could be provided of his Czechoslovak nationality.<sup>32</sup>

### Sporting career

Prague was considered one of the main early tennis centres in the monarchy. Tennis was played there by both Czechs and Germans. As a sport popular with the upper classes, it was also a favourite sport amongst the Prague Jews, who belonged to the wealthiest social strata around 1900. It is peculiar, though, that a bulky three-volume work *Jews in Czechoslovakia* does not mention Hedwig at all, stating only that "Jews [from the Bohemian Lands] began to compete in tennis in the early 1900s."<sup>33</sup>

She was one of the first generation of tennis players in Prague. The first mention of her tennis career only came in 1894 when she was already 30 years old. This may have been because there had not been authentic tournaments in Bohemia before this time. Nevertheless, Hedwig Rosenbaum must surely have played the game before this as she was runner-up in the first Austrian Lawn-Tennis Tournament, held in Prague in 1894. At first these competitions were organised by Hedwig's husband with a handful of his friends. In 1897 organisation was taken over by the newly founded Prague Lawn-Tennis Club.<sup>34</sup>



**Left: Charlotte Cooper of Great Britain was the first Olympic women's singles tennis champion. She had previously won at Wimbledon in 1895, 1896 and 1898. After her marriage, she won again in 1901 and in 1908 under her married name of Sterry at the age of 37. In the 1900 Paris Olympics, she beat the French H el ene Pr evost (right) 6-1, 6-4 in the final.** Photo: La Vie au Grand Air

Rosenbaum played in the tournament for eleven consecutive years between 1894 and 1904, when she reached the finals against Bromfield. She was the last of those who had taken part in the inaugural year to still be an active player.<sup>35</sup> As a member of the Prague Lawn-Tennis-Club, she competed with the likes of Leopoldine and Karoline (Kara) Countesses Nostitz, Leopoldine (Dinka) Baronesse von Ringhoffer and other aristocratic and upper middle class ladies, including a number of English players. Rosenbaum never won the tournament's singles, though she became a champion in mixed doubles handicap with "her old partner" T. H. Nash, a Vienna-based Englishman, in 1898 and 1899. In doubles, Rosenbaum sometimes teamed up with her sister Melanie Glaser.<sup>36</sup>

From 1894 onwards she took part in countless tournaments, mainly in German-speaking Central Europe. These were in such cities as Prague, Reichenberg/Liberec, Marienbad/Mari ansk e L azn e, Vienna, Gmunden, Bad Aussee, Wei enbach am Lech, Berlin, Dresden and Hamburg. She played both singles and doubles, including mixed doubles and handicap tournaments.

Rosenbaum enjoyed some tournament success. Her biggest victory came in 1899 at a tournament in Berlin 1899, although the *American Tennis Yearbook* claimed *the class of players in the Ladies' Championships of*

*Berlin was rather poor this year, – last years' winner, the Countess Schulenburg not being at the meeting. Frau Dr. Rosenbaum, who won the cup this year, is from Prague in Austria.*<sup>37</sup>

In 1903, while her husband represented Austria at the Lawn-Tennis Association congress during the Wimbledon tournament, she played in Reading, where she came third in ladies' doubles. She found the quality of first class English players "overwhelming" compared to continental players.<sup>38</sup>

By 1905, Rosenbaum's tennis career was coming to an end. She rarely played in public,<sup>39</sup> but she made occasional appearances until 1908 by which time she was 44. Her Olympic career had been short. She only played at the 1900 Games. She registered for the Olympics as a private individual from Prague, and was not part of the Czech, or the Austrian team. Like many Jews, she felt her closest affinity to the city of Prague, whose German-speaking Jewish inhabitants had little knowledge of, or interest in national quarrels. Today, her medals are mostly listed as representing Bohemia.

Rosenbaum, who was 36 at the time, paid an entry fee of 10 francs for the singles and five francs for the mixed doubles tournament. The competitions took place on the  le de Puteaux tennis courts. To win her

two bronze medals, she had to win only one match in Paris; with only six participants in ladies' singles, Rosenbaum advanced to the semi-finals without having to play a single match. She then lost 1–6, 1–6 to the French Hélène Prévost. A bronze medal match was not scheduled. The two defeated semi-finalists, Rosenbaum and Marion Jones (USA) are both credited as bronze medallists.

In the first round of the mixed doubles, Rosenbaum and Warden beat Kate Gillou/Pierre Verdé-Delisle 6–3, 3–6, 6–2, losing the semi-finals to Hélène Prévost/Harold Mahony 3–6, 0–6. The *Official Report* records that instead of medals, Rosenbaum won an objet d'art valued at 150 francs (for third place in the singles) and a similar prize worth 100 francs (for the third place in mixed doubles tournament).<sup>40</sup>

Few people noticed her "success" in Bohemia. Most of them may not have been aware that she had even taken part in the Olympic Games. For even her husband's sports column mentioned only the World Fair's Tournament or simply a Lawn-Tennis Tournament in Paris.<sup>41</sup> The 1900 Olympics saw Hedwig Rosenbaum at the peak of her career.

She was unable to compete with the top English or French players, such as Charlotte "Chattie" Cooper, who won the tournament, or runner-up Hélène Prévost, but was one of the leading Central European players at the time. Her social status was as important as her playing ability in opening the way for her to take part in the Olympics. ■

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