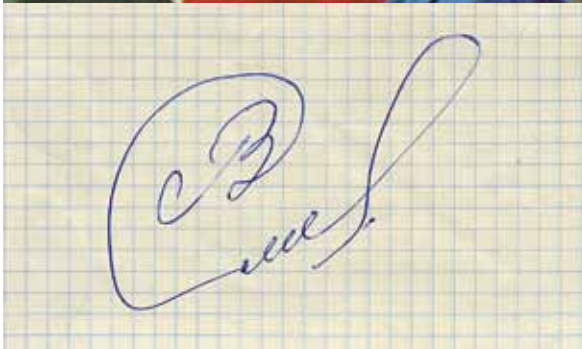
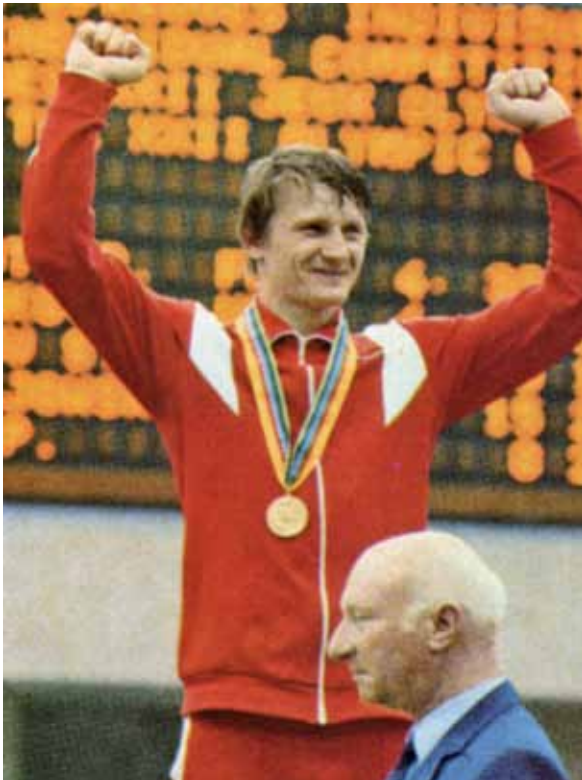


A tragic story and a wonderful reconciliation

By Michael Dittrich



"You've really done something there", laughs Matthias and grins at me. I was unaware of any guilt. Matthias is the famous German fencer Matthias Behr. We were about to begin filming a half hour television documentary about him and I had simply read his autobiography. *Erfolge, Licht und Schatten [Successes, Light and Shadow]* appeared in a print run shortly before his 60th birthday in the spring of 2015. He had dedicated it to his mother, his wife, his children and grandchildren, in order, he said, "to free myself from many a burden".

Until now Behr has been haunted by a tragic accident on 19th July 1982. At the Fencing World Championships in Rome, Behr's weapon had broken, and the blade penetrated the eye of his opponent Vladimir Smirnov, a Ukrainian representing the Soviet Union. Smirnov died nine days later on 28th July 1982, four days after those championships and was buried in his home city of Kiev.

Behr described in his memoirs how he had tried to contact his opponent's widow. "I have written many letters to Mrs. Smirnova describing my feelings. To date, I have had no reply. What was she supposed to write to me? Despite that, it remains my wish one day to receive some sign, any answer at all from her."

Before the start of filming, Behr told me that in the meantime, he had given up hope of a contact with Kiev. I was unable to stop thinking about it. I reported our conversation to a friend in Berlin, Volker Kluge. He suggested enlisting the help of ISOH member Maria Bulatova, director of the Department of History of Sports and Olympic Movement at Kiev University. Within a few days we had received contact details for Smirnov's widow Emma and her daughter.

My young colleague Pirmin Styrnol was holding the camera when we broke this news to an unsuspecting Behr in Tauberbischofsheim. We asked him if he was sitting comfortably and relaxed. Then we told him that Mrs. Smirnova and her daughter Olga were prepared to make contact with him. At the other end of the line there was silence at first. Then an exclamation – "whoa". Then more silence. And finally: "That's great. Oh, I'm pleased."

Behr was perplexed. At first he was hardly able to express his joy in words. But he reacted quickly with

A moment of glory: Vladimir Smirnov in 1980 in Moscow as individual Olympic foil champion. The Swiss IOC Member Raymond Gafner presented him with the gold medal. Below: Smirnov's autograph.

Photo: Official Report, Games of the XXII Olympiad, Vol. 3



Michael Dittrich | *1957; Filmmaker with Südwestdeutscher Rundfunk (SWR) and author. Main subjects: Olympic Games, football and cycling. In 2016 he produces a film documentary about Matthias Behr.

Because of a chronic inflammation of the central nervous system he sits in a wheelchair and can move neither his arms nor his legs.

Michael Dittrich and his friend Matthias Behr, who led the Olympic fencing support centre from 2010 in Tauberbischofsheim.

In despair: Matthias Behr after the tragic accident. In vain, trainer Emil Beck tried to console him. After an hour-and-a-half, the competition resumed without Behr. The Soviet fencers won. In the evening, they won the world championship title which they dedicated to Vladimir Smirnov.

Photo: Bongarts



help from colleague Tatyana. She worked with him in the Olympic support centre in Tauberbischofsheim, a bureau he has led since 2010. He wrote in Ukrainian to Emma Smirnova in Kiev. In his letter, the events of 1982 were recalled once more. He signed off "In the great hope of a reply, Matthias Behr, greets you both, very sincerely, from Germany." 34 years on, he was still unable to come to terms with the tragedy but now, he fervently hoped for an answer.

After the tragedy in Rome, Behr had even considered giving up fencing. The terrible event had imprinted itself on his memory. "Even today I puzzle my head: if only I had not been so ambitious at that time, if I had not taken part in that World Championships after my injury, none of that would have happened. Yet it did."

Monday, 19th July 1982

The German and Soviet fencers had been drawn together in the quarter-finals of the team foil event. On one side of the piste was Vladimir Smirnov, 28 years old, an army lieutenant from Kiev. He was a left-hander, a double Olympic gold medallist in 1980 who had won two World titles in 1981. At the time he was ranked number one in the world.

On the other side stood Matthias Behr, barely a year younger than Smirnov, but at 1.96 metres tall he had a height advantage of about twelve centimetres. Behr was number two of the world ranking list.

In his memoirs Behr described the decisive seconds on that fateful day: "We started an *Attaque Simultanée*, a simultaneous attack. Both of us tried to score a hit. There was no more going back, everything goes quickly, in fractions of seconds. What happened then I know only from what I was told."

The events went head over heels. Behr was completely exhausted: "I did not want, nor could I do any more. How could I come to terms again, work with young hopeful fencers, convey enthusiasm for the beloved sport, which I suddenly put in question myself? And which was obviously so dangerous that one could kill another person?"

He vacillates between the thought of an end to his career and a defiant continuation. He urgently needed help. One of the first to offer spiritual assistance was David Dushman who told him "Matthias, you can't help it, nobody can help it. Such a misfortune is pre-ordained by God."

Dushman is not just anybody. He is a Russian Jew, who volunteered for the front after the German invasion in 1941. He fought in tanks at Stalingrad and in the winter of 1945 drove one of the T-34s which rolled down the fences of the Auschwitz concentration camp. After the war he became Soviet national coach. He trained many successful fencers including Olympic champions Alexandra Zabelina and Valentina Sidorova.

The comeback and two Olympic silver medals

Behr was not alone. His family was at his side. He also received support from Emil Beck, the revered fencing master from Tauberbischofsheim. Beck had identified Behr's talent and become his mentor. He travelled with him to the Bayerischer Wald to help him relax. There was also help from team doctor Peter Lenhart. He referred him to the physiotherapist Klaus Eder, whose treatment proved helpful. The two became friends.

A year later Behr was back on the piste. He won team foil gold at the World Championships in Vienna. He returned from the 1984 Olympic Games with silver in both individual and team foil. "In Los Angeles I at



last received the long wished-for Olympic individual medal", writes Behr. "In the final I was against the Italian Mauro Numa. I led 7-3 until a minute before the end, already looked like the winner. But in an unbelievable fencing detective story I lost this fight very narrowly." After that Behr was chosen as "Fencer of the Year" by the Presidency of the German Fencing Union. Everything was good, almost everything.

Yet, the worst moment of his life continued to pursue him. "Only from what people tell me do I know that I ran here and there with the weapon and shouted 'No, no, no!' My brother Jochen was Emil Beck's assistant at that time. He took the weapon from me and uncoupled me from the electric cable of the scoreboard."

It really was a trauma. By definition: this is event to which an individual is exposed completely without protection and which leaves them helpless. It can have a long lasting effect and an impact on the individuals own life and their view of the world.

After the dark years, an answer from Kiev

Our filming proceeded and in time Behr informed us that post had arrived from Kiev. It was a reply from Emma Smirnova: "First of all I would like to assure you that the thought had never occurred to us that you are to blame. This terrible situation is tragic for both of us."

She writes that she had two children with Vladimir, Dimitri and Olga. She has remarried, yet her thoughts also centred on the dreadful event: "Again and again I wonder if organs were removed from Vladimir during a transplant or not? Perhaps his large and good heart is still beating today and I do not know. I wish you and your family all the best! Respectfully, Emma Smirnova, 20th April 2016."

The letter makes a big impact. We speak intensively to Behr about it. He tells us that he suffered for many years from depression. The accident in Rome was one thing and his deteriorating relationship with coach Emil Beck exacerbated matters. He even contemplated suicide:

It was a beautiful spring evening in March 2002. But I was aware of nothing of that. I stood on a motorway bridge. I had parked the car on an adjacent parking



area. I had already swung one leg over the parapet, yes, I meant to jump. I had no more hope, only longed to be relieved from this feeling, or rather from this not feeling, from my depression. I wanted to leap into the void.

But suddenly he came to his senses again. He thought of what would happen if he fell on a car and thus brought danger to other innocent people. He stops:

It was only a tiny spark which God had perhaps sent me. That spark in any case gave the strength not to throw away my life. Thus I found myself again back on the safe side of the bridge. Some time I climbed into the car and drove home.

Behr's broken-off blade forced its way through Smirnov's mask into his left eye. He was transported to the Roman Gemelli hospital, where severe brain injury was diagnosed. Foil and mask were confiscated. After this tragedy, the design of equipment was greatly improved. Such an accident could not happen today, says Matthias Behr.

Photos: UPI

Владимир Викторович СМИРНОВ

Комитет по физической культуре и спорту при Совете Министров СССР, Комитет по физической культуре и спорту при Совете Министров Украинской ССР, Спортивный комитет Министерства обороны СССР, Федерация фехтования СССР с глубоким прискорбием извещают, что на 29-м году жизни трагически погиб заслуженный мастер спорта СССР, чемпион XXII Олимпийских игр по фехтованию Владимир Викторович СМОРНОВ, и выражают соболезнование родным и близким покойного.

Из Рима, где несколько дней назад завершился чемпионат мира по фехтованию, пришло печальное известие: на 29-м году жизни трагически погиб чемпион XXII Олимпийских игр, заслуженный мастер спорта Владимир Смирнов. Ушел из жизни замечательный спортсмен, один из ярчайших мастеров советского фехтования.

Володя вырос в простой трудовой семье. Воин-спортсмен, комсомолец, член сборной команды СССР, он был хорошим семьянином и отличным товарищем. Восемна-

Светлая память о Владимире Викторовиче Смирнове, выдающемся советском спортсмене, до конца исполнившем свой долг, всегда будет жить в каждом из нас.

Группа товарищей.

The Soviet newspaper *Sovjetski Sport* published a "last salute" for Volodya on 29 July 1982 in the name of a "Group of Comrades" without, however, going into the details of the death of Vladimir Smirnov.

Source: Volker Kluge Archive

In Montreal, Matthias Behr (right) got foil gold with the German team in 1976. Next to him, the current IOC President Thomas Bach. Behr was also member of the team which won silver in 1988 and three World titles. Individually he won World Cup Gold in 1978 and World Championship silver in 1987.

Photo: picture-alliance



He is now in always in the best of hands. His wife is the double Olympic team foil gold medallist Zita Funkenhauser, now a dentist. But his depression remains. The carefree moments of former years have gone. Funkenhauser remembers:

One never knew what the next day would bring. What would the next hour bring? We had to ensure that there was always someone near him. I still remember how I ran around in the practice and then phoned home. If he did not go to the phone, I sent someone to look after him. Yes, those were not nice times. If Matthias had pulled on a sock, that was a gigantic exertion to put on the second as well.

Firm belief and a mother's consolation

At the beginning of life there was delight in "Tau-Behr-Bischofsheim". Matthias came into the world on 1st April 1955. Well looked after by mother Steffi and father Karl who was locomotive driver and allround entertainer. But soon there came the first blow. Matthias was not yet four when his father was killed in a car accident.

Faith helped and his mother comforted him. He has kept the lines which she wrote for him at that time: "Trust in God in every situation. Trust only Him. Whatever happens to you, don't give up, think always it must be thus. To cheer you up for the whole of your life, in love, your mother. Tauberbischofsheim, 4th April 1965."

Behr accepted this life and became one of the best fencers of the world. In 1976 he won Olympic gold in team foil alongside Thomas Bach. "In my scale of personal success, the Olympic victory ranks immediately after my victory in the World Cup in Leningrad in 1974", says Behr. On their return from Montreal, there were celebrations in "Tauber", as the locals call their town. "30,000 people greeted us and rejoiced with us", recalls Behr. "The whole town was full of cars. There was euphoria and pure joy. The two local breweries were already out of beer."

He has always enjoyed a good relationship with Thomas Bach who is now IOC President. Both grew up in Tauberbischofsheim. Physically completely different in appearance, they share common interests – including music, although Bach, a year and a half older, is keen on the Beatles, while Behr prefers the Stones. In the 1970s they both wore their hair long in the fashion of the times and continue to jokingly address each other by their mothers' first names.

Bach ended his competitive career in 1979, but remained closely connected thereafter to fencing. He was an eye witness to the tragedy in Rome:

That dug itself, I believe, deeply into everyone who was there at the time. And one of the first thoughts went of course to Matthias, because I knew him, also in his sensitivity. Then I asked myself if he would overcome all that. Those were really difficult moments. And even today ... How must things be for

Emma Smirnova and Matthias Behr at the Military Cemetery of Kiev, where the grave of Vladimir Smirnov, adorned with a memorial, is to be found.

Photo: Matthias Behr



him, if it is hard for me to talk about it. On the other hand is my admiration as to how managed to work his way out of this deep psychic valley.

The struggle lasted over ten years. "Depressions are form provided with the title: always healable", says Behr. "That is my experience. It is important that this is recognised early and that one gives oneself into professional hands. One needs a good environment, which helps." Who knows if the problems will return? From today's viewpoint it seems not. Behr feels healthy and spends a lot of time with his four children. He holds his grandson in his arms and beams with joy.

Our camera films Behr's first telephone call to Kiev. He is extremely tense when Emma Smirnova comes to the telephone. He begins to talk in German, then switches to English and into Italian. Finally Tatyana takes over the translation. Although separated by almost 2000 kilometres, Emma and Matthias found common ground from the outset. Later they made their first contacts on social media by Facebook. Although our film has long since been transmitted on TV and we have sat together for a radio programme – they have remained in touch.

In June 2017 Behr travelled to see Emma Smirnova in Kiev. Although remarried, she continues to use her first husband's family name. One day after his arrival he wrote to us: "Today on 9th June 2017 I have after 35 years been allowed to experience something incredible.

Undescribable! I am at my goal. That could not be expected. No, even in my boldest dreams I had not reckoned on this. I am very happy about it."

"Matthias, you bear no guilt"

At the airport in Kiev Behr was met by Vladimir Baban, Emma's second husband and then driven to the family dacha in a suburb. The story of his visit to the Ukraine was told in great detail in the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, the product of a day's interview given by Behr to a female reporter from the paper:

In greeting Emma kisses him on the cheek, left, right, without hesitating. Then she dishes up salad, cucumbers and tomatoes, steaks from the grill, homemade birch juice and vodka. Her family and the neighbour drink a toast, and when the evening arrives, Emma Smirnova strikes up a Ukrainian folksong, and all join in – in the end Matthias Behr hums along as well. So they sit there, drink vodka and laugh – Matthias Behr and the woman whose husband he 'killed' at the Fencing World Championships in 1982.¹

On the second day they visited the Kiev Military Cemetery, where Vladimir Smirnov is buried. There they met Oleg Telezhinski, a former training partner of Vladimir, who had made a special journey from Poland to see Behr. "Vladimir liked you very much", he assures

Emma Smirnova's second husband Vladimir Baban (left) and Smirnova's former training partner, Oleg Telezhinski (right), accompanied Matthias Behr on the way to the grave.

Photos: Matthias Behr



him, as a fencer and as a human being." At the grave, Emma Smirnova laid yellow roses, loved so much by her husband. She assured Behr once again: "Matthias, you bear no guilt."

They talked for hours. Emma had also suffered from depression after her loss. Sometimes she too could find no more meaning in life. Why did she never reply to the letters which Behr sent to the address of the Soviet Fencing Union? These had not been passed on. It emerged that they had only been forwarded after ten years.

The next day Behr met Olga Berendson, Emma's and Vladimir's daughter. They went for a walk. Her husband Andrey, who works as a football coach was also there, and their two sons: Artemye, the elder is eleven. Because he loves German football, Behr had previously sent him a ball and a jersey. It had been very friendly, he says. Understanding in English had worked splendidly.

Olga had been only four years old, Dimitri five at the time their father died. Dimitri known as "Dima" suffers from polyneuropathy, a painful and debilitating nerve condition which has left him bedridden. At 1.97m in height, he was once an enthusiastic basketball player. "How are you?" he greets Behr when he approaches his bed. The medicines he needs to relieve the pain cost the equivalent of 100 Euros per month. Emma and her husband receive only a small pension so Matthias promises to help. – He would like to return to Kiev soon, but this time accompanied by his wife Zita.

When he arrived back home, German newspapers wrote of a "Redemption in Kiev", "Finally, finally I am here" and "The conciliatory end of a fencing drama".

Long sought and now finally found

The wonderful story of a reconciliation does not end there. "Isn't it wonderful?" says Behr, "it is like a family I have gained." He starts to search some old documents and finds a letter from the former German Federal Minister of Interior, Gerhart Baum, who was also responsible for sport in 1982. Baum wrote:

I may assure you, that I regret very much that a sympathetic and blameless sportsman like you was involved in this serious accident. I have emphasised in a short speech before the national team that not the slightest reproach can be raised against you. Even in a conversation with the Soviet delegation I heard no reproach directed against you.?

It is a sympathetic letter written with much warmth and even today it has a positive effect on Behr. "That gets right under my skin." Emotional as he is, he grasps the telephone and calls Baum to thank him.

In September 2017 Emma Smirnova travelled to Germany for the first time in her life. She had been invited by Markus Lanz who presents a popular talk show on the German television channel (ZDF). In the programme Emma sits next to Behr, who brings to life the events of those days. The individual competition had not gone so well for him, he says. Vladimir, the 1980 Olympic champion, would have been called the 'mighty Smirnov'. "I was a fan of him and his fencing style. He had fought really wonderfully, absolutely professional and with 'tunnel vision'. During the competition he could not be spoken to."



Emma Smirnova confirms that: "From earliest childhood, he was a sportsman through and through. He would surely have been a good footballer as well. But fencing was his great passion." Asked to speak about the accident, Behr describes again, how the blade broke off and what then happened: "I was unable to imagine that Vladimir was really dying."

In 1982, Emma and her children heard the news on the radio. When then the names of the Soviet fencers who had won the title in the team competition were listed and Vladimir was not named, she suspected that something unforeseen must have happened, but imagined only that it would be illness or injury. "Until the end I did not experience the extent of this catastrophe. I knew at once that something bad had happened. I knew of his strength and thought that somehow everything would turn out right."

By now Behr had left Rome and travelled to the Netherlands with his family for a holiday. But for him there was no thought of rest and relaxation. Each day he monitored the German newspapers and learnt that Smirnov was in a coma. "And then came the 28th July, when you could read in all the newspapers that Vladimir had died in hospital in Rome."

Now he was undecided. Should he attend the funeral service? "On the one hand I wanted to fly to the Soviet Union. On the other hand I was in a complete panic at the thought of meeting Vladimir's wife. But perhaps I would be regarded there as a 'murderer', as the guilty party", he describes his feelings at the time.

Emma Smirnova hoped to travel to Rome to be with her husband in his fight for survival. But then Vladimir's

trainer came to her door and told her "You no longer need to fly. He will be brought back". For eight days the officials had discussed whether she should be allowed to travel. But the "Iron Curtain" remained closed. From Rome Smirnov was transported via Moscow to Kiev and laid in the "House of the Officers". His wife was taken there. "I was only able to look at him. That was it." It is visibly hard for her to speak about the Soviet times.

Since she has met Behr and she has been content that fate has now provided some kind of resolution. "I am very pleased that we have found each other", she says. "I never had the feeling of blaming him. No, I do not know this feeling, perhaps also because I knew my way around fencing." She only feared that Behr would never find that out: "I was keen to make that clear to him. I often thought about it. I could imagine what weighty feelings he carried around with him."

At this moment Behr reaches for her hand and presses it. For thirty-five years they have been searching, and now and finally they have found one other. ■

The unbelievable has happened: after 35 years Emma Smirnova and Matthias Behr have found each other. In September 2017, there was a return visit in Hamburg, where both took part in a popular TV talk show. Next time Emma and her second husband will be guests in Tauberbischofsheim.

References

Matthias Behr, *Erfolge, Licht und Schatten*, Tauberbischofsheim 2015
 Michael Dittrich, *Matthias Behr – Träume und Trauma eines Florettfechters*, TV documentary, Südwestdeutscher Rundfunk (SWR), 2016
 Talkshow "Markus Lanz", Second German Television (ZDF), 13th September 2017

- 1 Claudia Rey, "Er wollte ihn nicht töten", in: *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, 19th July 2017
- 2 Letter from Gerhart Rudolf Baum to Matthias Behr, 27th July 1982