

The IOC during the World War II

By Karl Lennartz

In several issues we have published biographies from IOC Members since 1894 conform the manuscript by Ian Buchanan and Wolf Lyberg. In issue 3 from 2001 the ones having attended the IOC Session in London were mentioned. During the Second World War, the IOC had no possibilities to meet. On January 7/8, 1942, IOC President Count Henry de Baillet-Latour died. Vice-President Sigfrid Edström took over the Presidency. By way of his "Circular Letters"¹, he kept contact with the IOC Members from neutral Sweden. In June 1944, the IOC celebrated the 50th Anniversary of the Olympic Movement. A short time before the end of the war in Asia, the members of the Executive Committee: Edström, Avery Brundage and Lord Aberdare met in London. They discussed the future of the Olympic Movement and expressed the hope that the Olympic Games for 1948 could take place in St. Moritz and London. For that reason the first IOC session after the Second World War was convened for 1946. During that session 13 new members were elected into the IOC.

Edström becomes acting IOC President

In choosing as host cities for 1944 London for the Summer Games and Cortina d'Ampezzo for the Winter ones, the IOC at its Session in London in 1939 had just plotted the main vertices of the Olympic calendar for the coming years when German troops attacked Poland on 1st September 1939, thus unleashing the Second World War. Despite immediate declarations of war by England and France against the Third Reich, direct military action in the first months was limited to Polish and after the Soviet attack on 30th November 1939 Finnish territory. The minimal impact on the rest of the world doubtless misled the Olympic community into expecting a rapid settlement of the crisis along the lines of the events surrounding the former state of Czechoslovakia in the spring of 1939. Initially, the plans for the 1940 Games were maintained and agreements were simply reached concerning the



eligibility of athletes from belligerent nations. However, once the Germans had relinquished the Games on November 22, 1939 and the Finns in turn on April 23, 1940, these considerations became irrelevant. When the war spread to Western Europe in May 1940 and de Baillet-Latour's home country, Belgium, fell into the hands of the Germans, it became clear that not even Olympic activity could remain unaffected by events.

As already described above, in the period that followed, the IOC President came under pressure from German sports officials to imple-

ment a reorganization of the IOC to suit the German government's purposes, but he refused to convene a Session before the end of the war. Aware that he had lost his independence, he entrusted the conduct of Olympic business to his deputy, Edström, who had already been serving as IOC Vice President since de Blonay's death in 1937. As a citizen of neutral Sweden and Chairman of the Supervisory Board of the Swedish electrical company ASEA, Edström still had good communication facilities and, in the middle of the year 1940, after consulting with de Baillet-Latour, he began to send out at irregular intervals circulars, some of them very lengthy, to the IOC members all over the world. In these letters, which were to amount to 27 between then and the first post war IOC Session in Lausanne in 1946, he asked the members to report to him on their situations and activities. The replies, which he received from a total of 60 out of the 72 addresses – of the remaining twelve, seven had died and the three Chinese members, the Estonian Joakim Pukh and the Peruvian Alfredo Benavides were beyond his reach –, were incorporated into subsequent circulars, so that the IOC members were very well informed about the situations of their colleagues in other parts of the globe. A further source of information for the IOC was the bulletin, which still appeared in conjunction with the "Olympische Rundschau", edited by Diem and published by the International Olympic Institute, until, in October 1944, publication of the "Rundschau" was

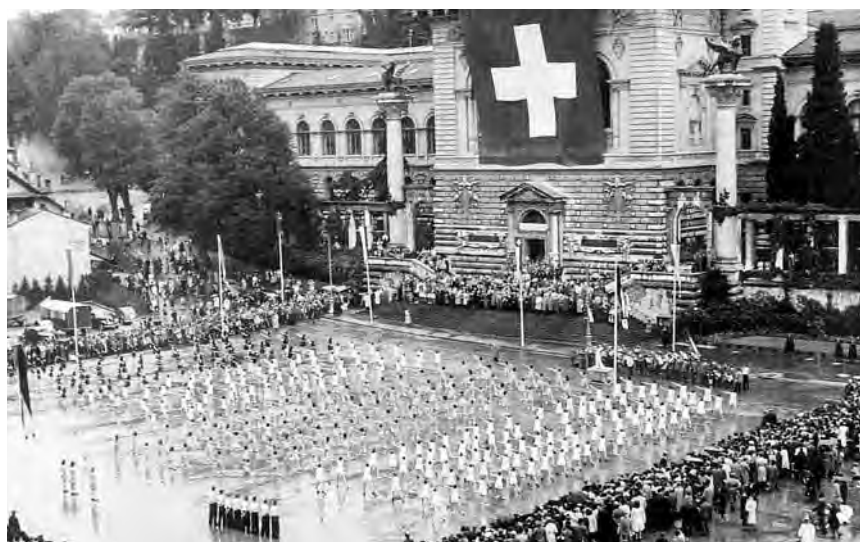
suspended, "initially for the period of one year"²; in any case, the bulletin had come to contain little more than address lists and obituary notices. As it had been agreed at the Session in London in 1939 that, in future, members would no longer be coopted by a postal vote, members who died could not be replaced during the war. Nevertheless, four temporary members were appointed to fill seats which had fallen vacant in Colombia, Portugal, South Africa and Switzerland.

Then, in early 1942, Edström had the sad duty of informing the members of the death of de Baillet-Latour, which he himself had learned from a telegram from Berlin. Having played de facto for a year and a half the role of a communications centre for the IOC, whose membership was scattered all over the world, he now became acting President under the Charter until such time as a successor to de Baillet-Latour was elected at the next Session – a very remote prospect for the time being. A trip to Lausanne which he first envisaged in January 1942 had to be put off until autumn of that year, but, on his return, he was able to report to his fellow IOC members that Madame Zanchi – the Secretary General, Berdez, had died on 9th January 1940 was running the offices admirably.

The 50th anniversary of the founding of the IOC

Despite the cancellation of the Games and the fact that the IOC's activity virtually ground to a halt during the war years, there was one date which the IOC could not let pass unheeded: the fiftieth anniversary of the founding of the IOC and the revival of the Olympic Games in the Sorbonne in Paris on June 23, 1894. Shortly before his death, Coubertin himself had expressed the hope that the celebrations would be worthy of the occasion, and Edström tried to comply with this wish. In consultation with the acting President, the Swiss NOC and the city of Lausanne organized the official celebrations, which Edström then announced in his circular of May 15, 1944. They were scheduled to take place on June 17, 1944 and were to mark the start of a two week anniversary programme.³

While the war raged with full force on almost all fronts and Germany's troops and those of her allies were being rolled back almost everywhere – on 4th June, the Americans had taken Rome; two days later, Allied divisions had landed in Normandy and had been gaining ground ever since while, the same day, the Red Army had begun its summer offensive on the entire eastern front – , those who represented international sport on that Saturday in Lausanne were, in the main, Germans. The only IOC members to put in an appearance were von Halt and the Bulgarian diplomat Stephan Tchaprachikov, who was for the most part resident in Berlin and had National Socialist sympathies; Diem was there as Director of the In-



ternational Olympic Institute and most of the International Federations were represented by German board members. Also present were delegates of the Swiss NOC, among them Henri Guisan, former IOC member and now Commander in Chief of the Swiss Army, and Albert Mayer, who was later to become an IOC member, and the widows of Coubertin and de Blonay. The Countess de Baillet-Latour, who was also expected, sent her apologies, as did Edström himself.

The day of the main celebrations was entirely devoted to Coubertin's memory. It began with a commemoration at his tomb followed by an academic ceremony in the main lecture hall of the university, the main theme of which was "La leçon de Pierre de Coubertin". In the course of five lectures, his life, his work as an historian, an educationalist and a humanist and as a friend and promoter of sport and, finally, his doctrine were examined in turn. At the IOC function in the afternoon, the Swiss NOC President Marcel Henninger first presented a commemorative document to the IOC in the person of von Halt, and the Swiss Councillor of State Perret conveyed the greetings of the Swiss authorities and paid tribute to the good working relationship those authorities enjoyed with the IOC. A speech by Coubertin, addressed in the last year of his life "to the Youth of the world"⁴, was then played over loud speakers. Edström's address was read out by Albert Mayer. Its subject matter was the spirit of amateurism and chivalry in sport.

In it, he also announced that the Executive Committee had commissioned the minting of a medal to commemorate the anniversary. On the obverse, it bore an effigy of Coubertin and the inscription "Pierre de Coubertin. 23 juin 1894. Sorbonne" and on the reverse a victorious athlete of antiquity, flanked by two pairs of admiring athletes, one male and one female, the inscription "50^{ième} Anniversaire des Jeux Olympiques Lausanne

Gymnastics demonstration in front of the Palais de Rumine, which then housed the Lausanne University on June 17, 1944. Left page: Cover of a commemorative publication issued by the City of Lausanne.

1944" and the Olympic motto "*Citius, altius, fortius*"⁵. He further announced a tribute to Coubertin by Carl Diem to be published in the next issue of the "Olympische Rundschau", which, however, did not appear as the review was suspended in autumn 1944. The first series of celebrations were brought to a close with a performance of the "Olympic Ode" by the Greek Vasilaki Photiades.

The company then betook itself to Place de la Riponne, where boys and girls from Lausanne schools gave a demonstration of physical exercises. An inscription was then unveiled in the entrance hall at Mon Repos: "La ville de Lausanne, siège du CIO, à Pierre de Coubertin, ré-

tion and Sport, and the Education Minister Abel Bonnard paid tribute to Coubertin's achievements.

Olympic activity resumes

In autumn 1944 the military situation had now shifted markedly in favor of the Allies – Edström travelled to London, where he met Lord Aberdare, and from there to the USA to see Avery Brundage. Back in Sweden, he proposed the American, whom he described as an important collaborator of Coubertin and De Baillet-Latour, for the post of 2nd Vice President, to replace where necessary Edström himself, who was at once President and Vice President and, at 74, no longer a young man.

Meanwhile, the end of the war was in sight and the President was faced with the task of setting a course for the postwar era. In his letters, he expressed the hope that, if the war should be over by 1946, the Games could be held again as early as 1948. When the fighting in Europe really stopped with the German capitulation of May 8, 1945, he convened the Executive Committee for a meeting in London from 21st to 24th August 1945.

Edström reported in his next circular on the results of this meeting, which, in addition to himself, only Lord Aberdare and Brundage had been able to attend. As the suggestion that Brundage should be made Vice President had met with only positive responses, the three members present had agreed that he should act for Edström should the need arise; as Japan's capitulation was only a matter of time following the atom bomb attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, they had further decided that the 1948 Games should take place, suggesting as venues London and St Moritz. On January 17, 1946, Edström invited the IOC members to Lausanne in September for the first post war Session. He sent out the agenda in late April together with his report on IOC activities during the war. With the Session in Lausanne, at which, in addition to 17 of the remaining members of the last prewar committee, nine of the 13 newly elected members were also present, the IOC was able to return to normality after seven years. The fact that this process went relatively smoothly was doubtless due not only to the fact that the administration had its headquarters in the neutral country of Switzerland but also to the judicious way in which Edström had managed to maintain communications with members throughout the world.



Commemorative medal designed by the Swedish artist Tore Strindberg (reverse). Right: commemorative postcard with special stamp and special cancellation.

novateur de l'olympisme, en commémoration du 50ème anniversaire du rétablissement des Jeux Olympiques. Le 23 juin 1944". Below, there appeared the following quotation from Coubertin: "*L'olympisme tend à assembler en un faisceau radieux tous les principes concourant au perfectionnement de l'homme*" (Olympism seeks to gather together in a pencil of rays all principles which help towards the perfecting of mankind).⁶ After words of thanks spoken by von Halt on the IOC's behalf, Francis Messerli and Mrs Zanchi led the guests through the Olympic Museum. That evening, Sophocles' "Oedipus" was performed in French translation in the open air. On the following 18th June, as a further tribute to Coubertin, a conference on sports education was held at the university, and, in the two weeks that followed, Lausanne hosted numerous sports events in which athletes from 30 nations took part. Among the competitions were Swiss championships in a number of sports, but also, oddly enough, a cycling road race for professionals. The entire anniversary programme was documented in detail in a commemorative publication issued by the City of Lausanne, and the Swiss postal authorities marked the occasion with the launch of a three part series of commemorative stamps. Fifty years to the day after the founding of the IOC, on June 23, 1944, a commemoration was also organized in Paris, still under German occupation. At the Sorbonne, Armand Massard, President of the French NOC, Colonel Pascot, Secretary General for Educa-

1 Edström's 27 circulars to the IOC members constitute the major source.

2 Olympische Rundschau No. 7 (1944) 24, p. 31.

3 50^{me} Anniversaire de la Rénovation des Jeux Olympiques. Lausanne, Lausanne 1944. Carl Diem, Jubiläumsfest des IOK, in: Olympische Rundschau No. 7 (1944) 24, p. 20 24.

4 Ibid, p. 18.

5 Ibid, fig. 1.

6 Ibid, p. 19.