

On the necessity to initiate research on sport in World War II concentration camps and POW camps

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ABSTRACT

Sport practiced in extreme conditions of World War II behind the barbed wire of concentration camps and POW camps is one of the most heroic chapters in all its history. With the use of selected memoirs of prisoners' from Nazi concentration camps and POW camps the author presents types of physical exercises practiced by camp prisoners and analyzes unusual conditions in which the said prisoners demonstrated not just their love of sport, but the will to survive in the psychological sense and to maintain minimum physical vitality. The author discusses two basic types of *Lager* sports: those organized secretly by the prisoners, which involved secret food services for the 'athletes' (some being real athletes detained by the Nazis); and those arranged by the Germans in order to trick and convince international organizations, such as the Red Cross Committee, that human rights were respected in their camps. Refined forms of "sport exercises" as a system of torturing prisoners are also mentioned. Examples from following concentrations camps and POW camps such as Auschwitz, Dobiegniew (Woldernberg), Mauthausen and Nurnberg are provided. Details of POW camps, like Colditz, where the Commonwealth soldiers and officers were detained and engaged in different British sports such as football and stoolball, are discussed in association with a parallel paper delivered by Dr Joanna Witkowska on British Sport in POW Camps during World War II.

KEY WORDS

sport in concentration camps, sport literature, war memoirs of sport.

War has always been perceived as an overwhelming event which prevents human beings from living a normal life. Ludic activities, including sports, typical of a peaceful social life seem rather inappropriate in circumstances of war with the usual tragedy and awful consequences. Sport, as a way of achieving bodily excellence and beauty, seems especially to be in extreme contradiction with war cruelties, limitations on a normal social life, hunger, activities necessary to survive, frequently merciless military invasions and persecution of one society exerted upon the other. It is surprising, however, to see that during many wars, including ancient wars, sport was a kind of a protest against inhuman circumstances caused by military actions, occupations or different types of enslavement. The most typical examples were provided by the Greeks during the Persian invasion.

Shortly after the battle at Thermopylae, the Persian Emperor Xerxes learned from one Greek deserter, that the Greeks were at the time celebrating their Olympic Games, disregarding the war. The fact that the first prize had no value but was just a wreath of olive branches shocked Xerxes' officers. One of such officers, Trintantaichmes, turned to the Persian general Mardonius (Persian name Mardoniye)

and remarked: "For goodness sake, what kind of men are these that you are leading us to fight against, men who compete neither for gold nor for any material reward, but simply for honor!" [1].

Coming to more recent times, one may observe that this kind of human attitude towards ludic activities in the most severe circumstances still persists. And it was certainly a demonstration of human pride against all odds that encouraged prisoners of German concentration and POW's camps to organize sports in these most inappropriate places. It is, at the same time, one of the most neglected area of sports history although at a popular level it has been raised many times in the memoirs of the captives themselves, exploited in cinema such as movie directed by John Houston and titled just *Victory* in the USA and *Escape to Victory* in the UK (1981, eatured by Max von Sydow, Sylvester Stallone and such players as Pele and Polish footballer Deyna. The movie describes the attempt of prisoners of war to escape during the break in the match between them and the German team), or the short novel titled *The Boxer and Death* (Polish *Bokser i śmierć*, 1956) by Polish novelist Józef Hen (1952), which became a screen-play for the Bohemian

movie with the same title directed by Peter Solan (Czech title *Boxer a smrt*, 1962). Its plot tells us of the match between jailed Polish boxing champion and German commander-in-chief of the Lager. In a number of memoirs and even novels sport is also shown as a means of raising physical strength necessary during their potential escapes or even of camouflaging of prisoners working on underground tunnels. The gymnastic apparatus called the wooden horse or vaulting horse served to transport sand from the tunnel hidden in a number of small bags to the roll-call ground where it was spread under the cover of the chest. This is a scenario found in various movies, such as *The Wooden Horse* directed by Jack Lee and produced in 1950. In this movie the British war prisoners of Stalag Luft III in Żagan (German Sagan) organized an escape under the cover of gymnastic exercises in which such apparatus was conspicuously used and gave the title of the film. It was in Żagan Luft III that a certain British officer had the idea of a daily gymnastics routine during which the aforementioned apparatus was used. They placed it as far from the barracks and as close to the barbed wire perimeter fence as possible in order to dig a tunnel under its cover. A similar episode, concerning the same prison camp in Żagan, can be found in the well known American movie titled *The Great Escape* directed by John Sturges (1963) and based on the novel of Paul Brickhill with the same title. We know from history that several prisoners were able to escape from the camp, but the majority of them, with the exception of two successful escapees, were eventually caught by the Germans and, on the special order of Adolf Hitler, executed.

Despite all the interest on the part of the memoir and novel writers and also the media in sport as practiced in concentration and POWs camps, there has been no wider historical research on the subject. Sport was practiced in a number of German concentration camps, Stalags for ordinary soldiers, Dulags for junior officers and Oflags for officers, numbering around 600. All of them are still waiting for a historian who would be able to evaluate sport as practiced there, its basic examples, its character and especially its role in maintaining psychological strength and national pride. This is also relevant to the earlier World War I. Before World War I there is one significant exception concerning sport in POW Camps during the Boer War, when the British allowed some exercises in their South African concentration camps where the Boers were jailed. Here, some form of athletics and cricket were allowed.

And it is rugby played in British POW camps during the Boer War which is so far best described by Floris J.G. van der Merwe from the Department of Human Movement Studies University of Stellenbosch South Africa [2].

None of these sports, regardless of the time or the type of war, involved highly competitive games or breath-taking records. A future more general history of sport in war camps will rather be a story of human spirit demonstrated in difficult conditions, a show of defiance against oppression and discouraging circumstances.

We do not know anything about games and exercises organized in such camps before the end of the 19th century. Perhaps it was partly due to the low awareness of the need to preserve mental and bodily health through physical

exercise and partly due to the lack of any regulations which could guarantee a minimum of rights for prisoners of war. The American physician Samuel Gridley Howe who, in 1832, visited the camps of Polish internees in Prussia after the collapse of Polish National uprising against Russia in 1830-1831, gave this description in a letter to Marquis Lafayette:

"I found nearly 4,500 soldiers, separated in different cantonments. Many of them were illy clad – hundreds were without shirts; but all were suffering from anxiety mounting almost to despair. They had been separated from their only friends, officers; they were divided into small bodies, the better to destroy their esprit de corps; they were continually harassed by the Prussians who had them in charge [...] they were alternately cajoled, discouraged, and threatened; yet they remained firm – they swore rather to die than reenter Poland except with arms in their hands, to drive out its tyrants [...] they had been abused and insulted and fired upon" [3, p. 58].

The attitude towards physical exercise and more generally to recreation and sporting activities changed in 1907 with the adoption of the so-called *Hague Convention*. The convention set a certain level of humanitarian conditions in war camps. During World War I, in some prison camps, we observe some sporting events organized in order to relieve the tensions of captivity and to fight the monotony of prison life. Polish legionary soldiers, interned by the Germans in 1917-1918 at the village of Szczypiorno near Kalisz, Poland, played team handball matches. These matches provided the initial impulse for the development of the sport, which had neither been practiced nor known in Poland before.

Soon another document, this time the so-called *Geneva Convention* contained an article entitled *The Treatment of Prisoners of War* and encouraged many new improvements in war-camp conditions. During World War II, sport was a frequent pastime of prisoners of war in both German camps for allied soldiers and, on the other hand, also organized on British and American soil for German, Italian and Japanese captives. In both Britain and the USA conditions for practicing sports in prison-camps were comparatively liberal, regardless of whether they concerned simple soldiers or officers. One of such camps was located in Bridgend Island Farm in South Wales. Recently, however, it is sport center which is planned exactly on the sport of the former POW camp. Only one hut (number 9) is predicted to be preserved while the rest of them will be cleared. So far, I am unaware of what kinds of sports were eventually practiced by captive soldiers of the so called Axis Alliance, i.e. Germany, Italy, Hungary, Japan, etc. It is a suggested topic for sports historians in the United Kingdom and the United States of America.

More information is available on the situation in German camps, although the situation varied between particular types of camps. It also depended on how liberal the attitude of the camps' commanders was. Generally, in lagers for officers practicing sport was considered as comparatively normal although it was limited.

In at least three POW camps for officers, can we note attempts to organizing camp "Olympic Games" arranged on the occasion of the Olympic years 1940 and 1944. The best known were the Games organized in Oflag IIC at Dobiegie-

niew (*Germ.* Woldenberg). The prisoners, having practiced different sports since the beginning of their captivity, decided to celebrate the canceled Olympic Games formerly set to take place in 1944 in Helsinki, Finland. A group of graduates of Warsaw's Central Institute for Physical Education were captive there and they succeeded in persuading the Germans to allow the organization of a sports competition reflecting the Olympic program to some degree. Arkady Brzezicki, a Polish officer commented on the event: "It was a great event of the camp to organize the Olympic Games. They were held from July 23 until August 13 1944. As many as 460 athletes took part. The organizing committee was directed by Antoni Grzesik, commander of a company fighting in 1939 in which Janusz Kusociński also fought" [4, p. 12]. Moreover, apart from the typical sport events, the prisoners also organized an Olympic Literature and Art Competition modeled on similar competitions organized during the Olympics since 1912. There was a group of writers in the camp, who enthusiastically undertook the idea. Among them was Stefan Flukowski, reserve officer and well known poet and literary critic. He was able to organize the camp literary group named "Zaulek" (The Alley). Flukowski was personally responsible for organizing an "Olympic" literary contest. Three medals were awarded in the same way as in the real Olympic Games: the gold medal was awarded to *The Prayer (Polish Modlitwa)* by Jan Knothe, the silver to Edward Fischer with *The Song of the Tramp (Polish Pieśń o trampie)* while, ex aequo, two bronze medals went to Władysław Milczarek, author of the poem *The Archer (Łucznik)* and Ludwik Natanson who wrote *The Stadium in the Sunlight (Stadion w słońcu)*. We should add to this some information about the POW internal postal service, where prisoners produced postage-stamps with the Olympic symbol of 5 rings and graphic representations associated with different sports.

In camps for lower ranks, however, such as junior officers and ordinary soldiers human rights were not protected by the Geneva Convention to the same degree as officers and prisoners could be used there as a labour force. In this type of camp attempts to organize sports were encountered serious difficulties while military discipline was much stricter. At the same time, the captives were occupied with heavy work which certainly exhausted their physical strength to a substantial degree. For instance, in Stalag XIII "A" Langwasser in Nuremberg (Nurnberg), ordinary soldiers had neither the time nor the facilities for sport. Nevertheless, the French and Polish prisoners were able to secretly organize some "chamber sports", selected in such a way, that they were comparatively easy to hide from the watchful eyes of the Jerries. In such a way, despite the difficult conditions, an underground "Olympic Games" was held in Stalag XIII "C" in Nuremberg-Langwasser, with French, Dutch, Belgian and Polish participants. The games included leapfrogging, stone throwing, archery, a high jump over barbed wire, and cycling on a hidden bicycle placed on a podium. The contest was accompanied by a recitation of the *Olympic Laurel* by Kazimierz Wierzyński, the poetry gold medallist at the 1929 Olympic Games in Amsterdam. Poems written by the prisoners were also read, providing a tragic and piercing document of the time, e.g. the following poem by rifleman

Brystek (Christian name not preserved) of the 21st Infantry Regiment:

"The barbed wire laurel
Nineteen forty... the year of the Olympics
The torch of war is burning, the hordes of the Armada race
Race to victory for the laurel leaf
Sieg heil! Vorwärts! To destruction! To action!
Let every rival know our ability!
Our Führer is with us and Gott mit uns!
The SS relay race to Warsaw,
Where the Icarus of Valhalla will light the bloody torch.
With their accurate throws, the Grenadiers
Turn their house-targets into pitiful stumps.
When there are no more targets in the Sirenian garden,
Jawohl! There is still the shepherd on the road.
The war stadiums have gone quiet in Poland,
The torch of Warsaw has gone out, despite the courage.
The winner is waiting for his russet laurel.
Has he forgotten he is already crowned?
There are laurels on his cap:
Crossbones and skulls".

During these "Nuremberg Olympics", winners received pennants edged with barbed wire as prizes. A poster by E. Turbaczewski accompanied the games, while a special Olympic stamp was made from a potato (both can be seen at the Museum of Sports and Tourism in Warsaw). Years later, Teodor Niewiadomski wrote his play *Olimpiada, jakiej nie było (The Olympiad That Never Was)*, staged in Poland in 1973. The games at Stalag XIII "C" were also the basis of A. Kotkowski's film *Olimpiada 40*, shot in 1980.

However, irrespective of the camp type, there were always some sports being played, especially gymnastic exercises or various ball games. Such sports held in POW camps were described and attested in a number of memoirs written and published by former prisoners of war. In the personal memoirs of one of them, the British captain Patrick R. Reid, we can find the following statement about the necessity to practice sports in prison camps:

"I realised that this game was a manifestation of our suppressed desire for freedom. While the game was in action we were free. The surrounding walls were no longer a prison, but the confines of the game we played, and there were no constraining rules to curtail our freedom of action. I always felt much better after a game. Followed by a cold bath it put me on top of the world" [5, p. 99].

The practice of sports organized for prisoners was non-existent in prison camps organized by the Japanese. They adhered neither to the Hague nor the Geneva conventions. They also forced not only ordinary soldiers but also officers to work, which was against international law. To dig into Japanese documents of former prison camps seems impossible at the moment. But we can reconstruct a picture of the situation on the basis of some memoirs and even literature based on real facts. For instance, the dispute over employing officers as labour in Japanese POW camps is described at the beginning of Pierre Boulle's novel *Le pont*

de la riviere Kwai (1952), translated into English as *The Bridge over the River Kwai* (screened under a slightly changed title *The Bridge on the River Kwai*, by David Lean in 1957). In his inaugural speech, General Yamashita pointed out what kind of "sport" could be counted on in a Japanese camp: "Reasonable work is the best thing in the world for keeping a man physically fit" [6] also emphasized that "Sickness will not be considered an excuse", which perfectly delineated the state of camp health care [6, p. 9]. The ethos of this was very close to the slogan "Arbeit Macht Frei" at the entrance to the *Konzentrationslager* in Auschwitz. The life of the Polish officers who were interned in 1939 by the Soviets and then murdered at Katin, Mednoye, Kozelsk and Ostashkov excluded sport entirely. German soldiers in Soviet captivity as well as Soviet prisoners kept in German camps were not killed but were treated without any respect for international conventions. John Borrie, a British officer and physician from New Zealand, was captured in 1941 during the campaign in Greece and then remained in a German camp until he was released in 1945. Here he observed one nearby camp filled with Soviet prisoners. He commented that in contrast to prisoners from France, Britain or Poland, Soviet POWs lived 'on 600 calories a day, were dying like flies from famine-oedema and tuberculosis [...] from German neglect' [7, pp. 96, 103]. In such circumstances one could hardly imagine that anyone could even think of sport.

Despite all the German atrocities and cruelties sport was also practiced in the dramatically extreme conditions of concentration camps. It was here that it took on particularly tragic forms and at the same time very ironic meaning. It existed here in varying forms, however. For instance, the Nazis in Auschwitz *Konzentrationslager* organized kinds of sport demonstrations for propaganda purposes, especially during Red Cross inspections. Such attempts were undertaken in order to convince the external world of the 'normality' of life in a concentration camp. Also, SS-men from time to time arranged different sport spectacles for their own satisfaction. This involved those prisoners who had been competitive or even professional sportsmen before. These were, for instance, the Polish national champion in boxing Antoni Czortek and some other quite distinguished sportsmen of the countries represented in the camp. Unfortunately, information about them was preserved only occasionally in the memoirs of Polish prisoner Z. Małecki who mentions particular athletes incorrectly by their Christian names only or by surnames without Christian names. According to Małecki, in Auschwitz one could find the European champion in wrestling, Eufretti of Italy, the Third Reich champion Walter, the Dutch champion Sanders and some others who had fallen into the disregard of the Nazi authorities. The matches between jailed athletes had a rather surrealistic air when we consider the extreme circumstances of the camp: "We fought for real, sharply, without faking [...]. The Germans would not allow a soft fight for show. I saw some fighters who would not fight seriously having dogs set at them [...]. A refusal was met with the gas chamber" [8]. Distinguished Polish writer Tadeusz Borowski, who was also jailed in Auschwitz left a description of a similar fight in his biographical short story *U nas w Oświęcimiu* (*At Our Area in Auschwitz*):

"In the afternoon, I went to the boxing match at the huge barrack of the Waschraum, the place from where the transports for gassing first left. We were let inside with ceremonies even though the room was packed full. The ring was set up in the large waiting room. Light from above, a referee (nota bene a Polish Olympic referee), world-famous boxers, but only Aryans, because Jews were not allowed to take part. And those same people who would put out teeth by their tens day in day out, many with empty jaws themselves, would get excited over Czortek, Walter of Hamburg and some young boy, who, after having had some training here at the camp, grew to become, as they say, a really classy one. The memory is still there of number 77 who once boxed the Germans as he liked, taking revenge in the ring for what others suffered in the field. The room was full of cigarette smoke, and the boxers pounded at each other as hard as they could. But they did so unprofessionally, even though with much obstinacy.

'This Walter', Staszek would say, 'Just look at him! At the commando, if he wants, he puts down a Muslim (the name 'Muslim' was used in Auschwitz to describe a hungry and close to death victim of the camp; comment added by WL) with one punch. And here, just look, three rounds and nothing! And he has got his own face battered. Must be too many spectators, mustn't it?' Still, the audience went into ecstasies, and we in the first row, naturally, tough blokes" [9].

The entertainment of Nazis was not the only factor stimulating sporting competition in concentration camps. It also functioned as a way of achieving internal escape and asylum among the dreary surroundings, finally as a kind of spontaneously arranged psychological balance and counterweight to the camp's actual reality. Some months after the end of his imprisonment in 1945, the prisoner Alfred Labenz noted in one press recollection that during Christmas Eve of 1943 at another *Konzentrationslager* in Dachau: "It was a strange thing, so many extremely important things were going on around the world [...], the whole world was ablaze, while we, the sporting youth, finding ourselves in such tragic conditions, criticized the sportsmen, clubs and sport officials of pre-war Poland with so much zeal, verve and a kind of fury. We argued passionately over the level of football [...], compared athletic results, etc." [10, p. 66].

According to a report by Kazimierz Małycha, a prisoner of the camp at Mauthausen-Gusen, printed in Poland in the newspaper "Kurier Sportowy", there was a regular international football league organized by the prisoners of the camp. "To keep the footballers on top form, those colleagues who could or who did receive food packets, imposed a tax upon themselves for our footballers, and fed them. Many of them owe their survival to football" [11, p. 1]. The final match of this international league, proudly proclaimed the 'World Championships', was played by the Polish and Spanish teams, with Poland winning. In addition to that, boxing and wrestling matches were organized in secret and hidden from the camp authorities in baths and attics. "Due to the scarcity of space, the events had to be ticketed" [11, p. 1].

And it was soccer which became a tragic contradiction and, in fact, a denial of the real sporting ethos in the form that it existed in the camp reality. The previously mentioned T. Borowski, who, during one match arranged to entertain

the Germans, played as a goalkeeper. In his biographical short story *Ludzie, którzy szli* (*People, Who Went By*, 1946) he described an incident when, in the time it took to pass the ball twice, three hundred men and women were killed in the gas-chamber:

“The ball went out of play and rolled up to the barbed wire fence. I ran to fetch it. Picking it up from the ground, I looked at the loading platform. A train had just arrived at the platform. People started getting off the wagons and walking towards the forest [...]. I returned with the ball and kicked it out onto the field. It passed from foot to foot and came back towards the goal in an arc. I cleared it for a corner. It rolled into high grass. And when I was picking it up from the ground, I came to a halt: the platform was empty [...]. I came back with the ball and passed it for the corner kick. Between the first and second corner kick, three thousand people were gassed behind my back” [12, p. 156].

Josef Hen's short story *Bokser i śmierć* (*The Boxer and Death*, 1952) is another famous literary description of matches staged at concentration camps. Although it has no biographical character and belongs to literary fiction it is based on the real recollections of former prisoners. The plot of his short novel is located in a fictitious concentration camp commanded by the ex-world boxing champion named Kraft, a protagonist obviously modeled on the famous German boxing champion Max Schmelling. His counterpart is the Polish boxer Kominek who is imprisoned in the camp. Kraft is aware that Kominek can help him to win back his world title after the war. Thus, Kraft used the Pole as his sparring partner to maintain his condition. He provides Kominek with better food and exempts him from the heaviest forced labour. But after some weeks it appears that in such comfortable circumstances Kominek surpasses Kraft in the art of boxing although he is reluctant to openly disclose his superiority to the German commander. The crucial moment of the short novel comes when one of Kominek's friends is killed by SS-men. Then Kominek overcomes his psychological inhibitions and knocks Kraft out. The angry Kraft sentences Kominek to death in revenge but is then frankly reminded of the idea of fair play, even by other German officers and liberates Kominek to the extent, that he can leave the camp freely. Kraft compensates for his discomfiture by sentencing fifty other prisoners to death. When Kominek, who is just leaving the camp, is informed about this, he comes back to the camp and demonstratively joins the sentenced group about to be executed. We mentioned earlier that Hen's short-novel was screened by Peter Solan, a Czech director, under the title *The Boxer and Death* (Czech title – *Boxer a smrt*, 1963).

A similar plot can be found in Stanislaw Dygat's short story *Faul* (*Foul Play*). An SS-officer, Pfisterer, who lost a boxing match against the Pole Mielczarski before World War II, meets Mielczarski again in the camp, of which he is now commander. Pfisterer plans to take revenge on Mielczarski in a sporting fight. Mielczarski is afraid to win, knowing that he can go to the gas chamber. However, when the war ends the Pole in the just-liberated camp fights a bout against the German, and defeats him now

without any psychological barriers. Although Dygat used changed names for his characters, he used a true story told to him by one of the witnesses of the real event. Dygat, incidentally, having Polish as well as French citizenship was interned in a Prisoner of War Camp close to Bodeen Lake in Germany, and thanks to this he was able to paint a realistic atmosphere of the camp.

This kind of literature demonstrates the social importance of the sport as played in concentration and prisoner of war camps. The games organized there irrespective of where and when they took place, and of how they were presented in memoirs, fiction or movies, rank among the more optimistic moments in the history of modern sport. Certainly, the level of competition was not excellent there. But the importance of these events lies not in competitive results, not in records and medals, but in showing men's ability to survive and to demonstrate its humanity despite the most extreme odds and unfavourable tragic circumstances. This is why such events, happening in unusual and extreme circumstances, should be considered as worthy of serious historical research in a way similar to the research done on other important sporting issues and problems.

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