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Games of the X Olympiad in Los Angeles 1932: The Story of the Czechoslovak Olympic Team

Sport i Turystyka. Środkowoeuropejskie Czasopismo Naukowe 2/1, 65-74

2019

Artykuł został opracowany do udostępnienia w internecie przez Muzeum Historii Polski w ramach prac podejmowanych na rzecz zapewnienia otwartego, powszechnego i trwałego dostępu do polskiego dorobku naukowego i kulturalnego. Artykuł jest umieszczony w kolekcji cyfrowej bazhum.muzhp.pl, gromadzącej zawartość polskich czasopism humanistycznych i społecznych.

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Abstract

A lot has been already written on the Czechoslovak results at the Games of the X Olympiad in Los Angeles in 1932. However, not much is known about the journey of the Czechoslovak team to the venue and back. This text focuses on this adventure, describing the problems that the Czechoslovakian team faced in the context of the economic crisis, the actual journey to the United States on board the steamship, the trip across the United States, the encounters with Czechoslovak compatriots and American politicians, sporting successes at the Olympic Games and the spectacular return of Czechoslovak athletes to Prague. The method used for this paper is the historical method. Primary sources were the main sources of information, mainly the estate of the General Secretary of the Czechoslovak Olympic Committee, František Widimský, his memoirs, period articles and unique photographs from the archive of the Czech Olympic Committee. Thanks to these sources, the entire course of the journey was successfully reconstructed.

Keywords: Olympic Games, Los Angeles, 1932, Czechoslovakia, Frantisek Widimsky, Czech Immigrants, The Great Depression.

Prologue

The preparations for the Games of the X Olympiad in Los Angeles were preceded by an important turning point in the history of Czechoslovak Olympic Movement. During the general assembly of the Czechoslovak Olympic Committee held on 4 March 1929, Jiří Stanislav Guth-Jarkovský, the current president, and Josef Rössler-Ořovský, a long time general secretary and pioneer of the

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Czech sport, both resigned from their posts. They were replaced by Josef Gruss, a doctor, a university professor, an all-around sportsman and the committee official, and by František Widimský, who were elected the President and the General Secretary, respectively. As we will later reveal, the new secretary Mr. Widimský was the life and soul of the Czechoslovak expedition to the United States.

The Great Depression that struck the United States by the end of the 1920s had effect on all areas of life even in Czechoslovakia, including the Czechoslovak Olympic team who had trouble securing funds for their journey over the ocean. This time, the Czechoslovak Olympic Committee could not depend on the government financial aid. In the hard times of economic crisis, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Education and National Enlightenment refused to provide finances for the journey. Despite repeated appeals, the Czechoslovak Sokol Organization, the main source of Czechoslovak athletes at past Olympic Games, preferred to finance preparations for the All-Sokol Slet and decided not to participate in the Olympic Games in America. The funding, therefore, had to come from private sources. On March 1, 1932, the evening edition of the National Newspaper (orig. *Národní listy*) published a call for a fund-raising campaign. With time, individuals, students, different institutions, even particular sport associations, joined the campaign with their donations. The new president of the Czechoslovak Olympic Committee Josef Gruss decided not to travel to the USA with the team, as was usually the case, to allow another athlete to participate in the games. He saw the team off with the following words:

Safe journey to Los Angeles!

A lot of hard work has been done by those believing in the Olympic ideals, money was raised by the efforts of the Czechoslovak athletes and now you are leaving for the United States to defend the honor of our national flag.

Your leader is the well-known sportsman Dr. Widimský -we rely on him and you that you will do everything in your power and show what you have trained for so that Czechoslovakia is represented at the Olympic Games with dignity.

In the country of stars and stripes, remember the breathtaking moments we experienced during the festive days of the Sokol Slet, and though there are no Sokols in your midst this time, remember the words of our national hero Miroslav Tyrš so we can be proud of you!

We wish you safe journey and good luck from the bottom of our hearts!

Dr. J. Gruss¹

Czechoslovak Olympic Team

In the end, seven athletes and three members of the support team left for Los Angeles. Let's introduce them shortly:

¹ F. Widimský, *Ročenka Československého olympijského výboru 1929–1932*, ČSOV, Praha 1933, p. 93.

František Widimský – the leader of the group, the General Secretary of the COC. Originally a high-school professor of German and French, a former rower and secretary of rowing association travelled to the Olympic Games also as a technical delegate. He served as a General Secretary to the COC until 1951 when the committee was dissolved by the Communist Party. However, he had been losing his influence on the actual affairs of the Czechoslovak Committee since 1948 when the Communist officials and members of the State Security assumed power.

František Douša – an athlete, a shot-putter and discus thrower. He was a postal clerk by profession. After graduating from the Faculty of Electrical Engineering of the Czech Technical University in Prague, he was employed as engineer at the Ministry of Communications. He had originally specialized in javelin throw. He was a long-time member of Slavia Praha from 1927 to 1941. Douša set a world record in shot put with 16, 04 meters in October 1931 in Brno, only nine months before the Olympic Games, and became one of the contenders for the gold medal.

Andrej Engel – an athlete, 100 m and 200 m sprinter. Engel was the only representative of Slovakia and the youngest member of the Czechoslovak team. At that time, he was the Czechoslovak champion in both events. After 1938, he ran from the Nazis to Sweden where he stayed for the rest of his life.

Oskar Hekš – an athlete, a marathon runner, predecessor of the famous Emil Zátopek. Soon after the Olympic Games in LA, he organized the Czech Committee for 1936 Olympic Games from Berlin. Being a Jew, Hekš was sent to concentration camp in Terezín in 1941. Two years later he ended up in Auschwitz, where he died in 1944.

Josef Urban – wrestling. He had concentrated his whole career on Greco-Roman wrestling in the heavy weight category. He had already participated in 1928 Olympic Games in Amsterdam. He was a policeman by profession – his colleagues from the police force had donated money for his journey to the USA. After he had retired from active participation, he became a coach.

Jindřich Maudr – wrestling. Maudr worked as a plumber in Electrical Utilities (today Prague Public Transport Company). He won a silver medal in 1928 Games in Amsterdam, in 1931 he won bronze at the European Championship. He was among the gold medal contenders in LA. He was a member of the Bohemians Prague sport club – other members of the club helped him to acquire the finances necessary for his trip to the USA.

Václav Pšenička – a weight-lifter. In the 1930s, Pšenička was among the best in the world in the heavyweight category. He worked as a driver in Electrical Utilities. He participated in the Olympic Games in Amsterdam where he won the fourth place. In 1934, he was the first recipient of the Jiří Stanislav Guth-Jarkovský Award. This award is given to the most important sport personalities or teams for their excellent results in a particular year. This prize is awarded by the Czech Olympic Committee even today.

And last but not least, **Jaroslav Skobla** – a weight-lifter. At the time of the Olympic Games in Los Angeles, he worked with Josef Urban as a policeman; he was later employed by Electric Utilities as a handler. His journey to California was also sponsored by his colleagues from the police force. Skobla was the most experienced one in the team, those were the third Olympic Games in a row for him.

The following people travelled to the Olympic Games as a support:

František Menšík – a coach, a member of COC, he served on several positions in the International Wrestling Federation and International Weightlifting Federation. He participated in the Olympic Games also as a member of the jury in both sports.

And **Karel Čížek** – the doctor. He has paid for his journey himself.

Additional twenty artists participated in the Art competitions. None of them actually travelled to America, only their works. Among those were such artists as Josef Suk, Jakub Obrovský, Alois Dryák or Max Švabinský. The funds in the amount of 600 dollars for transport and insurance of the art pieces were provided by the Americans.

The whole visit in Los Angeles was coordinated by the Olympic attaché, the Czechoslovak consul and a Czech immigrant Felix B. Janovský².

From Prague to America

For nearly a year before the Olympic Games, there were negotiations conducted with a number of American, French, German and Dutch companies regarding the sea voyage to America. In the end, a company called Northern German Lloyd was selected thanks to its favorable financial conditions and its past experience with a similar voyage to the 1932 Winter Olympic Games in Lake Placid. The date of departure and the length of the voyage were also convenient. The company also guaranteed inside cabins where the Czechoslovak team would not suffer from the rocking of the boat on a stormy sea, the full board and training facilities.

The departure date was set to Saturday, July 9, at 3:30 pm. The team travelled by train from the Prague Masaryk Railway Station through Dresden to Bremen, arriving to the city on Sunday morning. After a sightseeing tour and a short rest, the team departed from the seaport of Bremenhaven. Shortly after midday, the ocean liner called “Europe” set out on a week long voyage across the Atlantic. Apart from the Czechoslovaks, there were also Germans, Austrians and Latvians.

² Felix Bohumil Janovský (1880–1953), born in Blatná. He came to the USA in 1894. He graduated from Chicago Business College. He became an owner of a printing company, worked as a broker and instance agent. Between 1911 and 1915 he was a member of the Chicago City Council. After 32 years he moved to Los Angeles and became a president of the Great Western Bank. He served as the Czechoslovak attaché in California.

Aboard the ship full of Olympic athletes, the atmosphere was Olympic right from the start.

During the week-long sojourn on the ship, the athletes enjoyed excellent food and, apart from training, engaged in different past-time games such as table tennis or volleyball. The crew also organized a grand tour of the ship including a tour of the engine room. The tranquility of the journey was interrupted on the fourth day when a number of passengers started to suffer from sea-sickness. František Widimský commented this occurrence with his usual wit saying that “not only athletes can run fast!”³ On Saturday, July 16, shortly after midday, the ship arrived at the Brooklyn’s pier No. 58. After a warm welcome, the athletes were transported to Hotel Algonquin on 44 Broadway. Having only few moments to take a breath, they were shown around downtown by the Czech-Americans with the help of the NY police force. In the evening, a welcome party was held in the New York National Library.

The next day, the team had time off. Some of the athletes went for a walk along Broadway, others rested in the hotel. The group was invited to lunch by a group of Czech immigrants and patrons of sport – the Lhotans. After a pleasant lunch, that lasted nearly three hours, the group went to see Jimmie Walker, the Mayor of New York, who welcomed them in Flushing Bay, in the boathouse of the First Czech Rowing Club. Who could have guessed at that time that only few weeks later, Mayor Walker would have to resign from the office after being accused of corruption?⁴

At 7 pm that evening, a five-day long journey to the far away California started at the Grand Central Station.

From New York to Los Angeles:

The group spent 26 long hours on the train, in stifling heat, before reaching their first stop in St. Louis on Monday, July 18. Their Czechoslovak compatriots welcomed the travelers with a home-made beer (at that time, the prohibition rules varied from state to state) and treated the team to an opulent dinner. A tour of a Sokol camp by the Mississippi River followed in the evening. After midnight, the train departed to Kansas City where, thanks to the exchange of locomotives, the team had several hours to rest, have breakfast in a hotel and do some sight-seeing in cars around neighborhood with its beautiful gardens. In a couple of

³ František Widimský Fond, Volume I, Los Angeles, A/3498. The Olympic Study and Information Center of the Czech Olympic Committee, Prague, Czech Republic.

⁴ See. G. Young, *Mayor Jimmy Walker: a finer class of corruption*, The Bowery Boys: New York City History, accessed May 21, 2009; <http://www.boweryboyshistory.com/2009/05/mayor-jimmy-walker-finer-class-of.html>. See also United Press, *Walker Quits Political Life*, The San Bernardino Daily Sun, San Bernardino, California, Sunday (13 November 1932), Volume 39: 2.

hours, however, the athletes and their companions were on the hardest stretch of their journey through the states of New Mexico and Arizona and the Mohave Desert and its heat and stinging sand. They reached California in the morning of July 21. An Olympic Attaché, Felix B. Janovský, joined them in San Bernardino (the stop before the last) and presented the group with a welcome gift of 300 dollars. What he purposefully kept to himself was information on what was awaiting the boys at their arrival to Los Angeles: an amazing welcome from the local Sokols, banners, music, allegorical wagons, tens of national costumes, welcoming speeches with bread and salt – in one word a big national festival. A motorcade through the city to a town hall and an audience with the mayor of LA followed. After the words of welcome and some refreshments, the delegation went on to settle in the Olympic village.

The Olympic village was situated only four kilometers above the city, overlooking the entire LA, a refreshing breeze blowing from the sea to the village. There were altogether 2000 athletes from 40 countries accommodated in the village. Each cabin designed for four people was occupied by only two athletes; there were a shower, a sink and a wardrobe. Throughout the vast grounds you could have refreshments in several dining rooms; there was a post office, a health center and all other services. The village was guarded by cowboys on horseback at night. There was also the very first mascot of the Olympic Games, the dog Smoky⁵, who was born when the Olympic Village was built. Coach František Menšík remembers:

The Americans had a brilliant idea to concentrate athletes coming from all over the world in one village. The execution of this idea was successfully carried out. The fact that there were no serious disputes between people during the Olympic Games is the best proof of how the Olympic ideas bring people of all nations together. The organization was flawless and 2000 athletes subjected themselves to voluntary discipline in the morning. After a tedious trip in the tropical heat across America, we felt here like in a new world, here we were able to straighten our limbs and take a deep breath...⁶

In 1932, women lived outside the Olympic village, at a nearby luxury hotel in Los Angeles. The Czechoslovak team, the athletes and coach Menšík, stayed next to the Japanese, Finns, and Germans. František Widimský and Dr. Čížek lived in the city. After two days of acclimatization, a welcoming party was held on July 23 in the Santa Monica spa hall with the participation of over 400 people. As a surprise, a film record of their spectacular arrival in Los Angeles was screened for the Czechoslovak team.

Before the first races began, the athletes had had a week of training. They trained at various locations within a few miles of the village and were transported

⁵ *Those Loony Olympic Mascots*, Times, accessed May 5, 2010. <http://olympics.time.com/2010/05/21/those-loony-olympic-mascots/slide/smoky-los-angeles-1932/>.

⁶ F. Menšík, *Ročenka Československého olympijského výboru 1929–1932*, ČSOV, Praha 1933, p. 114.

to the sports ground by buses. In between trainings, Mr. Janovský arranged a number of activities such as an all-day trip to Pasadena, a trip to the Rocky Mountains, a visit to Long Beach, or a cruise to Santa Catalina Island on decorated fishing boats borrowed from Yugoslav colleagues who arranged for themselves a “little Dalmatia” on the sea for the duration of the Olympic Games. Janovský also organized a meeting with local Sokols and a small Sokol Slet, a participation at the celebration of nations at the Hollywood Bowl (an amphitheater for 25 000 spectators), and various lunches and dinners in many families who wanted to get to know our boys. The Czechoslovak team definitely did not suffer from boredom.

The 10th Olympics in Los Angeles began on July 30, 1932.

Games of the X Olympiad

We could talk for hours about the Olympic Games in Los Angeles, the aim of this paper, however, is to introduce to you the adventurous journey of the Czechoslovak team and briefly describe the most important things the Czechoslovak Olympic athletes saw in one month. Nevertheless, we have to look at their incredible sport performances.

The very first day was a great success for the Czechoslovak team. Despite a renewed elbow injury, František Douda won a bronze medal in shot put. Later in the evening, there was even a bigger reason for celebration when Jaroslav Skobla won the gold medal for weightlifting and Václav Pšenička won the second place. The mayor of LA was a firm advocate of prohibition and so František Widimský recalls how difficult it was to find a drink for a celebratory toast. In the end, they succeeded. The Czech expatriates had hidden supplies.

During next several days, the Czech team won a fourth medal in Greek-Roman wrestling thanks to Josef Urban who ranked third. Jindřich Maudr ranked fourth in a different weight category.

Oskar Hekš finished eighth in the marathon.

Andrej Engel ended in the preliminary races but he was close to qualifying for the semi-finals.

The Czechoslovak artists, or rather their art, did not stay too far behind. Josef Suk was a big success in the Art competitions. His march “Into a New Life” was awarded a silver medal. The international jury had exhaustively discussed whether to award Suk the gold medal. Due to the fact that part of the march was published sooner than allowed by the rules, the jury decided to reward Suk with the silver medal (neither the gold nor the bronze were awarded)⁷.

⁷ P. Hladík, *Naši umělci na olympijských hrách. Sport a umění. Seminář akademické sekce České olympijské akademie pořádáný ve dnech 18.–20. září 2015 ve Vizovicích*, ČOV, Praha 2016, p. 19–20.

Apart from Suk, it was the sculptor, Jakub Obrovský, who attracted the attention of the jury with his sculpture “Odysseus” for which he was awarded a bronze medal.

In the Architectural Design category, the architect Alois Dryák (the author of such buildings as Radio Palace and Hotel Europe in Prague) received an honorable mention for his “Plan for Strahov State Stadium”.

On August 14, the Olympic Games in Los Angeles came to an end. For the small Czechoslovak team, it closed with a great success. In his memoirs, František Widimský eloquently describes the heartfelt connection of the athletes with the expatriates in America and the sense of national pride and belonging:

It was with a heavy heart that we said goodbye to our friends in Los Angeles. Our boys, with their behavior and their achievements, stole everybody’s heart, and it was no wonder that many a tear was shed during our goodbyes. We will never forget Los Angeles till the end of our days. To all of you, dear friends in far away California, we cordially thank you, Dr. Janovský the most!⁸

Return

But that is only two-thirds of the story. The return home was still ahead of the Czechoslovak team. They did not wait for the closing ceremony. On August 13, after a day’s ride through fertile California, they were already absorbing the beauty of San Francisco. Everybody regretted that they had only one day to spend in this remarkable city, which was not enough. But they had to head for the railway station and embark on a four-day journey to Chicago with a short stopover in Omaha. On August 17, they arrived in Chicago, a city with a large group of Czechoslovak immigrants, a city from which Felix B. Janovský came to Los Angeles and where the Czechoslovak team met his brother, a city whose mayor was a Czech immigrant Antonín Čermák⁹ (who was, as luck would have it, visiting Czechoslovakia at the time). Expectations were probably too high, and so František Widimský describes how disappointed was the group with the second largest “Czech” city. In the two days they spent in the city, the athletes saw the city centre, visited the newsrooms of two Czechoslovak newspapers (*Svornost* and *DenníHlas*), the Chicago Union Stock Yard, the ground of the World’s Fair, participated in an evening banquet at the Slavic Sokol. But after what the team experienced in Los Angeles, mainly thanks to a perfect organization of Mr.

⁸ F. Widimský, *Ročenka Československého olympijského výboru 1929–1932*, ČSOV, Praha 1933, p. 142.

⁹ Antonín Čermák (1873–1933) was an American entrepreneur and politician of Czech origin born in Kladno. In 1931 he became the Mayor of Chicago. On February 15, 1933, during the visit of US President Roosevelt to Florida, he was severely injured by an assassin, and died four weeks later after his injuries.

Janovský, Chicago left an “embarrassing impression”¹⁰. For example, the expatriates who have asked for the Czechoslovak athletes to participate as guests in the “post-Olympic games” organized by Daily News did not even come to meet them. The Czechoslovak team was not included in the National Olympic Teams parade and the Czechoslovak flag was not even hung in the stadium. The chagrined athletes went straight to the hotel to pack their bags and headed to the train station, accompanied only by two former students of the Karlin Academy, who had been taught by František Widimský and who met with their professor here in Chicago after ten years.

They stopped for a short visit of the Niagara Falls. There, unexpectedly, the Czech-Americans were the most cordial. Mr. Matuška, a general store owner from Slovakia, welcomed the athletes with open arms – national songs were sung in his house, including several Slovakian in his honor. Widimský complimented his host: “With you, we understood how strong the national response was to the victory of our boys in the simple souls of compatriots scattered in the American sea”¹¹.

Next on the agenda was a return to New York, where everything was perfectly prepared by the consul Dr. Novák who made the arrangements for a reception at the police headquarters, a visit to the Times, refreshments at Lhotanas such as a month ago, a lunch at the F.K. Praha sports club, a stop at the Havranek brothers’ sausage factory and a farewell party at the National House.

And then it was time to definitely say good bye to America.

We were all moved. The fewer words there were, the stronger the handshake, the warmer the embrace. Dr. Novák did not leave until he saw our cabins convinced we were perfectly accommodated. It was midnight when the ship lifted its anchors

– Widimský describes the departure¹².

A warm welcome awaited the Olympic athletes at home. They stopped in Děčín, Roudnice nad Labem, Ústí nad Labem, and concluded their trip around the world with a tour of Prague. In the Old Town Square, thousands of people were waiting with Mayor Baxa. On November 18, President Tomas Garrigue Masaryk granted the team an audience.

The Los Angeles’ story came to an end. But in just two months, Adolf Hitler came to power in Germany, and everything was heading for far more tragic events.

Archive/photo archive source:

František Widimský Fond, Volume I, Los Angeles, A/3498. The Olympic Study and Information Center of the Czech Olympic Committee, Prague, Czech Republic.

¹⁰ F. Widimský, *Ročenka Československého olympijského výboru 1929–1932*, ČSOV, Praha 1933, p. 143.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 144.

¹² *Ibid.*

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Igrzyska X Olimpiady w Los Angeles 1932: opowieść o Czechosłowackiej Drużynie Olimpijskiej

Streszczenie

Wiele już napisano o czechosłowackich wynikach w czasie Igrzysk X Olimpiady w Los Angeles w 1932 roku. Niewiele jednak wiadomo o podróży czechosłowackiej drużyny do miejsca igrzysk i z powrotem. W niniejszym tekście skupiono się na tej przygodzie, opisując problemy, z jakimi borykał się zespół czechosłowacki w kontekście kryzysu gospodarczego, samą podróż do Stanów Zjednoczonych na pokładzie parowca, podróż przez Stany Zjednoczone, spotkania z czechosłowackimi rodakami i amerykańskimi politykami, sportowe sukcesy na Igrzyskach Olimpijskich i spektakularny powrót czechosłowackich sportowców do Pragi. Metodą zastosowaną w niniejszym artykule jest metoda historyczna. Głównymi źródłami informacji były źródła pierwotne, głównie spuścizna sekretarza generalnego Czechosłowackiego Komitetu Olimpijskiego, Františka Widimskiego, jego wspomnienia, artykuły z tamtej epoki i unikatowe fotografie z archiwum Czeskiego Komitetu Olimpijskiego. Dzięki tym źródłom udało się zrekonstruować cały przebieg podróży.

Słowa kluczowe: Igrzyska Olimpijskie, Los Angeles, 1932, Czechosłowacja, František Widimski, czescy imigranci, Wielki Kryzys.