



# The Olympic Idea transcending war



During its 43 years of existence, the Museum of Sports and Tourism in Warsaw has collected over 42,000 pieces, more than 10,000 of which are related to the Olympic Movement. The collection includes two unique items never before exhibited to the public. These are the Olympic flags used at the Games held between 1940 and 1944 in prisoner-of-war camps during World War II.

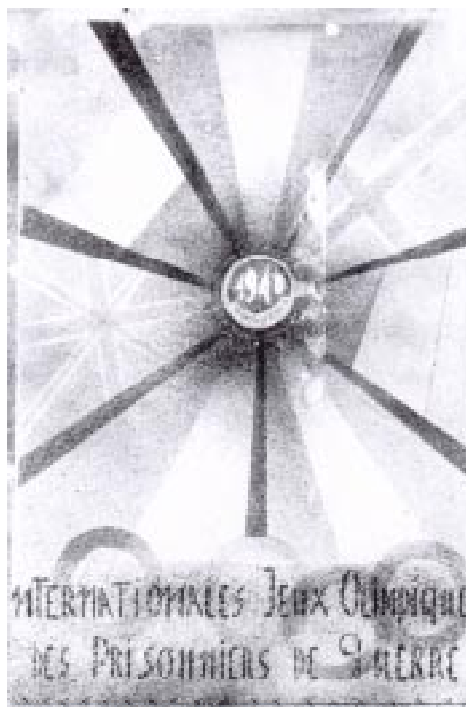
The flag of the underground Olympic Games inaugurated on 31 August 1940 in stalag number XIII-A in Langwasser close to Nuremberg, was acquired by the Museum over half a century later as a gift from a former participant in these unique Games, Mr Teodor Niewiadomski.

In dramatic circumstances, Niewiadomski hid and took the flag and other souvenirs of the Games (a miniature poster, a paper medal and a volume of poetry) out of the camp. The prisoners were mostly enlisted men from many of the countries in occupied Europe. It should be remembered that all contests were carried out in strict secrecy to prevent the camp commanders from discovering them. Possession of any material items relating to these Games was not allowed, as it could lead to exposure.

The flag, 29 by 46 cm in size, was made of a Polish prisoner's shirt and, drawn in crayon, it featured the Olympic rings and banners for Belgium, France, Great Britain, Norway, Poland, Russia and Yugoslavia. The flags symbolized the nationalities of the competing athletes. The Olympic oath was sworn with this flag. This honour was granted to three prisoners, one Polish, one French and one British. The

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words of the pledge were: *"In the name of all the sportsmen whose stadiums are fenced with barbed wire... Let these...*



*"Jeux Olympiques des Prisonniers de Guerre" be a symbol of the twelfth Olympic Games. I declare that the International Prisoner-of-War Olympic Games of the year one thousand nine hundred and forty in stalag XIII-A at the suburbs of Nuremberg, Langwasser, are open".*

A feature film entitled *Olimpiada 40* ("Olympic Games '40") about the prisoner-of-war Games of 1940, which is based on the true story of Teodor Niewiadomski, was produced and directed by A. Kotkowski in 1979.

The next Games, which completed the XIIIth Olympic Games, were held in

1944. Once again, the official Olympic flag was not raised at the stadium. It was replaced by a flag 48 by 105 cm in size, made of a bed sheet and pieces of coloured scarves. An oath was sworn before

this flag during the prisoner-of-war Games organized on the occasion of the Olympic Year and held between 23 July and 13 August 1944 in the Woldenberg camp (officers' prisoner-of-war camp - "oflag" II C).

The sporting programme included football, handball, volleyball and basketball tournaments, as well as athletic competitions and boxing and chess tournaments. The contests were carried out in a slightly atypical way, as the number of competitions (464) considerably exceeded the number of participants (369). Therefore, some participants took part in several contests. In total, there were 48 meets in all events. Only the boxing tournament was not completed, as this category proved to be too exhausting and dangerous for people living in prison camp conditions. After the first boxing matches, many competitors withdrew from the tournament owing to acute injuries and bone fractures. Only 31 of the 60 boxing matches scheduled

actually took place.

Within the programme of the official Olympic Games and in addition to the sporting events, art, painting, sculpture and music contests were organized in Woldenberg. The overall management of the Games was provided by Lieutenant Antoni Grzesik. He had been a commander of the company in which Janusz Kusocinski (who won a golden medal in the 10km race in Los Angeles) fought in September 1939 in the Battle of Warsaw. It was Lieutenant Grzesik

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who gave this flag to the Museum in 1974.

These two small, modest flags which are in the Museum's collection are a particularly moving symbol of the endurance of the Olympic ideal. A Woldenberg prisoner said: *"It seemed to us, who were removed from the war game that was being waged for life and death that it would be*

*good if somebody, somewhere - even in the prison camp - remembered this banner, which has always been a symbol of struggle, though never stained with blood"*.

It seems that, in this year of the centenary celebrations of the modern Olympic Games, recalling this very personal message from a participant in the prisoner-

of-war Games is a tribute to all the participants in the two subsequent Games, to the prisoners of the stalags and oflags, u-ho during the dark days of the Nazi occupation did not lose faith in the power of sports and the symbolic essence of the Olympic ideal.

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