

The life and nonconformist views of sport of Hermann Weingärtner (1864–1919)

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Summary

The present article is a review of the life and sport career of Hermann Weingärtner, one of the most outstanding gymnasts in the history of modern German sport. Hermann Weingärtner was a role model for whom the respect, love, and devotion to motherland were always of primary importance regardless of any obstacles. As an amateur athlete he proved he was capable of winning the most prestigious sport distinctions and representing Germany at international events. The article also discusses all forms of commemoration of sport achievements of this great German athlete.

Keywords: Hermann Weingärtner, Olympism, 1896 Summer Olympics, gymnastics

Hermann Otto Ludwig Weingärtner is a well-known figure to researchers of the history of Olympic Games. This renowned German gymnast born on August 27, 1864 in Frankfurt am Oder, rose to fame in 1896 by winning six medals at the Games of the I Olympiad in Athens. Unfortunately, there have been hardly any mentions of his life and sport achievements in Polish scholarly literature. Any bibliographical studies of Hermann Weingärtner must therefore rely based on foreign, in particular, German language sources.

The majority of biographical information about the famous Olympic athlete come from the private archives of Joachim Schneider, and from a book by Hans-Eberhard Fehland and Hans-Jürgen Losensky titled *Sportstadt Frankfurt (Oder)* published in 2005. Relevant information can be also found in a scholarly article *Hermann Otto Ludwig Weingärtner – Leben, Wirken und Rezeption* by Bianka Schwallmann published in a volume *Frankfurt (Oder) und die Deutsche Sport-Geschichte* edited by Ulrich Knefelkamp. The present paper is a detailed review of the life and sports career of Hermann Weingärtner on the basis of all available bibliographic records.

Family history and the beginnings of Hermann Weingärtner's sports career

The earliest mentions of Hermann Weingärtner's family history date back to 1860 and refer to the moving of the Weingärtners (father Gustav, mother Wilhelmine,

and son Albert) from Berlin to Frankfurt am Oder at the official invitation of the Frankfurt municipal authorities and the newly established local gymnastic club *Frankfurter Turnverein 1860* where Gustav Weingärtner was employed as a gymnastics instructor. In the year of the club's foundation he also took a sports instructor's job in the Frederick I Hohenzollern Gymnasium, where he organized swimming classes. In the same year his second son Max Robert was born, and four years later his third son Hermann, whose future sports career would make the Weingärtner family and the town of Frankfurt am Oder famous worldwide [Schneider 1991].

The Weingärtners lived in Fischerstraße, and their descendants still resided at numbers 2, 94/95, and 100 in the late 20th century. In 1865 Gustav Weingärtner opened a bathhouse in one of Frankfurt am Oder suburbs; however, it was closed down a year later, probably due to intense competition and the overall worsening economic situation in the country [Schneider 1991]. In 1867 he established an open-air swimming pool in the Ziegenwerder river island, which turned out to be a highly profitable family business for years. The Weingärtners had two more sons: Paul Max (b. 1866) and Erwin Johann Adolf (b. 1878) [Fehland, Losensky 2005, p. 11]. After Gustav Weingärtner's death in 1880 the family business was taken over by his wife and second son, and then after the latter's death by Hermann. After 1919 the business was managed by Paul Max Weingärtner, and from 1932 to 1939–1940 by a new owner. Then

the pool was completely destroyed due to bad weather conditions and was never rebuilt. The remaining ruins were completely removed in 2003 to make room for the construction of the European Garden in the European District in the center of Frankfurt am Oder [Schwallmann 2014, p. 92].

Young Hermann Weingärtner and his brothers were brought up in a sport spirit and were actively motivated by their father to train gymnastics. In his free time Hermann Weingärtner exercised in the Frankfurter Turnverein 1860 club, and during the day he worked with his four-year older brother in the Roland grocery store at Richtstrasse 76 in downtown Frankfurt. Word has it that he welcomed many female customers to the store while exercising and assuming various gymnastic positions [Fehland, Losensky 2005, p. 10].

In order to advance his gymnastic skills, in 1885 Hermann Weingärtner decided to move to Berlin to take up professional gymnastic training under the supervision of the best experts of the day. He began his cooperation with the German Gymnastic Federation (Deutsche Turnerschaft) – an association of all gymnastic clubs in the country – and joined the Berliner Turnerschaft gymnastic club. As a member of the gymnastic team Weingärtner soon started to attain successes in national and international gymnastic competitions, for example, at the 8th German gymnastic competition in Breslau in 1894, or at the 3rd Italian gymnastic competition in September 1895 (first place) [Fröhlich 2015].

German conflict of interest

Thanks to his great sport successes Hermann Weingärtner was invited to participate in the First Summer Olympics in Athens in 1896. However, the German Gymnastic Federation banned its members from participating in an event organized by Baron Pierre de Coubertin, whose French descent was an insurmountable obstacle in the context of very difficult and strained relations between France and the German Empire [Kluge 1968]. In its reply to Coubertin's invitation from December 1895 the German Gymnastic Federation stated that "The Organizer of the Games has always opposed the Germans in words and actions, which is unworthy of German honor. In consideration of this situation Germany will not participate in the Olympic Games in Athens" [Metzner 1968]. It was claimed the Coubertin's belated invitation to Germany to participate actually meant a refusal to participate. Coubertin purportedly stated it in an interview for one of French tabloids, and suggested that Germany had been intentionally informed about the Olympics with much delay because any prospective participation of representatives of German universities and schools would have seriously reduced the French athletes' chances of winning [Metzner 1968].

Coubertin issued an official disclaimer stating that his invitation to Germany had been received by the German military attaché and the secretary of football clubs in Strasbourg, Colonel Maximilian von Schwartzkoppen, and by the vice president of the interclub union, General Victor von Podbielski. The latter supposedly treated the invitation with mistrust and discarded the message [Buschmann, Lennartz 1996, p. 34]. On second thought, he later changed his mind and did send a short reply to Coubertin. Unaware of it, however, Coubertin asked the editor-in-chief of the German magazine *Spiel und Sport* to publish a panegyric to the Olympic idea and the programme of the Olympic Congress, hoping to finally convince the German officials to take part in a preparatory meeting in Sorbonne in 1894 and, in effect, conclude an agreement. Unfortunately, the German Empire sent no representatives to the meeting [Metzner 1968].

Von Podbielski's *faux pas* had an impact on the German public, which unjustly blamed Coubertin for the confusion. It seems, however, that the baron was aware of the consequences of this situation as he intended to extend the invitation to participate in the revived Olympic Games to liberally thinking athletes rather than athletes expressing radically nationalistic attitudes, and thus to avoid any organizational and ideological problems. This is why he had not sent the invitation directly to the German Gymnastic Federation, whose members were hardly influential or pragmatic, but only to the high representatives of the German authorities [Metzner 1968].

The German Gymnastic Federation presided by a physician and Reichstag deputy Ferdinand Götz, was an ideologically directed and structured organization and attached immense importance to the expression and development of national and civic loyalty during gymnastic training and competition. International sport was religiously and racially neutral, and adhered to two main principles: measurable sport results and fair play principle. According to the President of the German Gymnastic Federation, these principles were incompatible with the inner spirit and the main priorities of many German competitors [Metzner 1968]. In practice, however, many German athletes, including Hermann Weingärtner, expressed completely different views.

The encroachment of a French baron upon the German rules of competition and his intentions to organize an international sport event in an innovative way determined mostly by the principle of fairness rather than mass and dynamics, were unacceptable to the German imperial authorities. Coubertin's views were in direct contrast with the officially expounded views of the German authorities on gymnastic training and competition. The reasons for the German authorities' boycott of the Olympics were explicitly set out by doctor F.A. Schmidt, who was closely associated with the German gymnastic community: "By what right can we in any way approve

of an international sport event without any national traits or formal requirements of athletes' physical prowess; an event which attaches the greatest significance to subjectivity and awarding specialists for whom law and rules are only secondary?" [Metzner 1968].

In December 1895, ignoring the Federation's decision, a German naturalist Willibald Gebhardt founded the Committee for German Athletes' Participation in the 1896 Olympic Games in Athens – the first National Olympic Committee. He endorsed Coubertin's idea, proposed making peace, and pledged support for all gymnasts wishing to participate in the Olympics. Willibald Gebhardt is regarded today as the founder of the Olympic movement in Germany [Scherer 1996, p. 36]. One of the members of the Committee became Hermann Weingärtner bringing in his enormous sport potential and chances of victories.

The German Gymnastic Federation's opinion of Gebhardt's ambitions was very negative, and the Federation authorities upheld the ban on their insubordinate members' participation in the Olympics. The Federation president Ferdinand Götz sharply reacted to Gebhardt's initiative and again referred to "the honor of German men" and "German sense of duty never to tolerate any such French enterprises". The German press chimed together with Götz and violently attacked Gebhardt's proposals. In turn, in Gebhardt's opinion, the Federation authorities were driven by "unfounded chauvinism" which had nothing to do with "noble patriotism" [Metzner 1968]. Willibald Gebhardt realized that his views were not only in agreement with the views of the top and most experienced athletes of the day, but also that he fought on behalf of many novice and ambitious gymnasts. Thanks to his enormous commitment a group of German athletes organized by the committee and led by Hermann Weingärtner decided to defy the German Gymnastic Federation and take part in the Athens Olympic Games [Schwallmann 2014, p. 94].

Weingärtner's Olympic success and completion of gymnastic career

At the First Modern Olympic Games in Athens athletes competed in nine sports: athletics, cycling, swimming, shooting, tennis, fencing, weightlifting, wrestling and gymnastics. The last sport attracted the greatest number of competitors, who on April 9 and 10, 1896 took part in eight events [Zdebska 2010, pp. 36–38]. It must be emphasized that, with the exception of fencing, the International Olympic Committee had in 1894 decided to allow only amateur athletes to compete [Lennartz, Wassong 2004, p. 20]. All the Olympic competitions were held at the Panathenaic Stadium in Athens. Despite the fact that only 71 athletes from nine states took part in the competitions, the performance of the Ger-

man gymnasts was very successful [Porada 1980, pp. 230–243]. They won five gold medals, three silver medals, and two bronze medals [Schulz 2014, p. 47]. Six out of these ten medals were won by Hermann Weingärtner: three gold medals in individual and team horizontal bar and team parallel bars, two silver medals in individual pommel horse and rings, and one bronze medal in individual vault. Apart from Weingärtner the other German team members included Konrad Böcker, Alfred Flatow, Gustav Flatow, Georg Hillmar, Fritz Hofmann, Fritz Manteuffel, Karl Neukirch, Richard Röstel, Gustav Schuft oraz Carl Schumann [Mallon, Widlund 1998, pp. 70–74].

These medals are retroactively assigned by the International Olympic Committee, because during the 1896 Athens Olympics winners were given a silver medal¹. The winners were given a silver medal, an olive branch, and a diploma; the runners-up received a copper medal, laurel branch, and diploma; and the subsequent places only commemorative distinctions [Coubertin 1897, p. 50]. Furthermore, no medals were given to individual members of winning teams in team events thus Hermann Weingärtner actually received only one silver medal (for the first place in individual horizontal bar) and two copper medals (for the second places in rings and pommel horse) [Schneider 1991].

Hermann Weingärtner's successes made him the most awarded athlete of the Athens Olympics. He absolutely dominated all the gymnastic events and gained huge popularity among the fans. On his return to Germany, together with the majority of his fellow gymnasts who participated in the Olympic Games, he was suspended by the German Gymnastic Federation for two years for his participation in the Olympics and thus for defying the Federation's official ban. The German Gymnastic Federation would continue boycotting the Olympics considering them anti-German and contrary to the spirit of international competition [Schwallmann 2014, p. 95].

The local press in Frankfurt am Oder hardly exploited the gymnast's success. The reasons for this lack of interest were the aforementioned defiance of the Federation's ban but also Weingärtner's long-time residence in Berlin, where he had trained and returned to after the Olympics. The residents of Frankfurt am Oder did not even notice Weingärtner connections with his hometown. However, the sudden and unexpected death of his older brother, with whom he had worked in his youth in the grocery store, made Hermann Weingärtner return to Frankfurt am Oder, take over the family business [Fehland, Losensky 2005, p. 11], and conclude his short but hugely successful sports career.

¹ The Olympic gold medal as the first place prize was introduced in 1904.

Hermann Weingärtner's death and commemoration

In 1900 Weingärtner married a baker's daughter Hedwig Emilie Elisabeth Kummert, with whom he would then have three children: Elli Elisabeth, Käte Klara and Hermann Max Erich. After ending his sport career he settled down in his hometown and managed his bathhouse family business [Rössler 2013]. Hermann Weingärtner died on December 22, 1919 due to circulatory failure, after attempting to save the life of a man drowning in a local river [Kotterba 2009].

According to Joachim Schneider's archives the Weingärtner family vault was in the Frankfurt main cemetery until its complete removal in 1972. After that a commemorative plaque dedicated to the gymnast and funded by the Frankfurter Turnverein 1860 club was also removed. The deceased members of the Weingärtner family interred in the vault included Hermann Weingärtner, his daughter Elli, his parents, brothers Albert, Max and Robert with wife Elisabeth and son Kurt [Kotterba 2009].

Until 1990, Hermann Weingärtner had been virtually unrecognized as a German Olympian representing Frankfurt am Oder. His successes were attributed to Berlin as a city with the greatest influence on his sports career. One of the very few Weingärtner's memorabilia is his Olympic gold medal that was kept for many years in the Museum of Sport in Frankfurt am Oder. In 2003 it was handed over to the granddaughter of one of Hermann Weingärtner's brothers. For many years attempts were made to find the gymnast's original silver and copper medals. The two copper medals are presumed lost, while the silver medal was given by Hermann Max Erich Weingärtner in 1964 to Yukio Endō – a Japanese Olympic multiple medalist and world champion in gymnastics. For many years it was exhibited in one of Tokyo museums, unfortunately it was stolen in 2010 and has never been found [Wächter 2013].

In the last twenty years the municipal authorities of Frankfurt am Oder have been very active in commemorating the sports achievements of Hermann Weingärtner. There have been also many initiatives proposed by individual Frankfurt residents, who not only intended to honor the first Olympic champion but also to emphasize his links with his hometown. On October 8, 1996 the main footpath of the Ziegenwerder Island, i.e. the former location of the Weingärtner family swimming pool business, was named Hermann Weingärtner Path (Germ. Hermann-Weingärtner-Weg). It was officially inaugurated not only to commemorate the gymnast's successes but also to celebrate the centenary of the first Olympic Games of the modern era. Three years later the editors of *Märkische Oderzeitung*, a daily paper from eastern Brandenburg, organized a public poll for the best German

athlete of the 20th century. The judging panel consisted of one hundred experts and enthusiasts of sport and regional history. After counting all the votes, Hermann Weingärtner came third jointly with hurdler Karin Balzer and two-time Olympic wrestler Maik Bullmann. The winner was boxer Henry Maske, and the runner-up became road cyclist Falk Boden [Stulpe 1999].

In the subsequent years a discussion ensued about possible establishment of the Hermann Weingärtner Prize as an endorsement fund for young athletes. In 2008 the prize was awarded for the first time. It can be awarded only to athletes who attained extraordinary sports results in the previous year, and who thanks to their sport activities "did the city credit" [Lock 2007]. The Hermann Weingärtner Prize recipients have been:

- wrestler Marcus Thätner (2008);
- wrestler Mirko Englich (2009);
- judoka Romy Tarangul (2010);
- road cyclist Reinhard Scheer (2011);
- wrestler Yvonne Englich (2012);
- sports shooter Ralf Buchheim (2013);
- sports shooter Stefanie Thurmann (2014).

The prize winners receive 1896 euro, which is the amount corresponding to the date of the first Olympics of the modern era [Herold 2012].

In 2014, as part of the celebration of 150th anniversary of Hermann Weingärtner's birthday, the Frankfurt am Oder authorities decided to honor the gymnast's achievements and initiated cooperation with a number of business entities and institutions to disseminate the knowledge of Hermann Weingärtner's rich life and sports career. The year of 2014 was proclaimed the Hermann Weingärtner year. During a special ceremony the park area around the multi-purpose Stadium of Friendship in Frankfurt am Oder (Germ. Stadion der Freundschaft) was named after the famous gymnast. A commemorative plaque containing the basic information about Frankfurt's most famous athlete was also put up on a newly founded building in the stadium complex. Moreover, the Viadrina European University organized a Polish-German exhibition titled *The Turbulent Times* that showed Hermann Weingärtner as a sport legend and pioneer as well as presented the key developments in the history of German sport of the 19th century. The exhibition was opened by German diplomat and politician, Viadrina Rector Gunter Pleuger and Mayor of Frankfurt am Oder Martin Wilke [Kotterba 2014].

Conclusion

The removal of the family vault, complete destruction of the bathhouse and the disappearance of Hermann Weingärtner's Olympic medals eradicated all physical traces of the Weingärtner family. Only the memory of the great athlete still lives on [Adesiyan 2013]. There is no doubt however that Hermann Weingärtner has become an in-

tegral part of the history of Frankfurt am Oder and Germany. It was him who commenced the winning streak of German athletes at the Olympic Games. His determination and passion for sport make him a role model and an inspiration to maintain one's physical fitness on a regular basis. Hermann Weingärtner proved that an amateur athlete was also capable of winning prestigious sport prizes or representing his or her country at important international competitions. His defiance of the decision of the German Gymnastic Federation may be regarded as a display of his love to sport and of his true patriotic spirit, so different from the one propagated by the Federation authorities. His patriotism was based on respect, love and devotion to his fatherland, regardless of all hindrances. Weingärtner exhibited outstanding courage and gained something the sport authorities of the day never expected: a treasured place in public memory and respect and glory for many years to come.

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