

Ferenc Kemény and the Hungarian Olympic Ideal



Ferenc Kemény was born in Nagybecskerek, today Zrenjanin in Yugoslavia, on 17th July, 1860. He went to primary school there, and finished his secondary studies in Budapest after studying for a while in Stuttgart, Germany. His later very fertile career as a publicist in Germany was based on his knowledge of the German language which he had acquired there.

After receiving his teacher's certificate in physics and mathematics at the university in Budapest, he traveled to Paris in 1884 to perfect his knowledge of French. During his years of study there, he met Pierre de Coubertin, with whom he shared his views in matters of pedagogy and the necessity of introducing educational reforms. Both of them were dissatisfied with the state of education in their countries and within that, with the way in which physical education was treated.

No Hungarian data exist concerning historical documents of this period or a possible stronger friendship between them, only the Kemény memoirs published in the Hungarian press in 1936, the year of the Berlin Olympic Games, provide probably subjective information.¹

After his return to Hungary in 1888, he started working as a teacher, first in Kőszeg in Western Hungary, later in the secondary grammar school in Brasov, Transylvania. This is the time when he also received his third and fourth diplomas in German and French. In 1890 he was placed in the Eastern Hungarian city of Eger as a secondary school teacher. From this time his days were strenuous, first as a deputy schoolmaster and later as schoolmaster. He founded and later ran what was to be called a state practical school. As the seat of an archbishop, Eger had traditionally been one of the most conservative cities. As a result of Catholic attitudes towards education in Hungary, the smallest reforms were opposed both by the leadership of the church and the city hall.

However Kemény, under the protection from state finance because the Ministry of Culture decided to found a practical sub-school, held on to his modern attitudes, in which physical education also had a place - he planned the building of a gymnasium for the school - and introduced the study of the natural sciences and modern languages into the curriculum, an innovation at this time.²

Nevertheless, he was attacked several times during these years despite the fact that he was an important and active publicist at that time. He was a member of the society called Union des Sociétés Françaises des Sports Athlétiques

1 Cf. Magyar Világ. 1936. VII. évf. 91/93 .sz.

2 Cf. Varga, László: Kemény Ferenc a korszerű iskoláért és az olimpiáért. Eger 1989, p. 12.

in Paris as well as a number of Hungarian organizations, such as the national Secondary School Teacher Organization. He published a number of pedagogical articles during these years both in German and Hungarian on the importance of selecting a profession and in relation to education in schools, discipline in schools and the modernization of the schooling system. He strove to publish his studies primarily in foreign countries, in German and French speaking territories. In 1891 he even took personally part in a conference in Marseilles and gave a lecture. In addition to maybe vaguely remembering the mustache of his Hungarian colleague from Paris, Coubertin's attention was drawn to Kemény by his articles in German and French, such as „L'éducation physique dans les écoles civiles et militaires de l'Autriche-Hongrois“, which was published in the 25th May 1890 issue of „La Revue Athlétique“, and its German version, „Reformen auf dem Gebiete der körperlichen Erziehung in Ungarn“ which was published in number 7, volume XVI of „Zeitschrift für das Realschulwesen“. Since Coubertin wanted to find colleagues with similar principles from other countries to start the Olympic movement of modern times, he sent a letter on 15th January, 1894, to Kemény's address in Eger, in which he asked Kemény to cooperate in organising the Olympic movement.³ The Hungarian press, especially the press outside of Budapest, did not deal with the request of 1892 and its afterlife at all, thus Kemény could only become acquainted with it through the foreign press and professional literature. However, he did not deal with it specifically; all his efforts were concentrated on building the school in Eger and later running it. Coubertin sent his book entitled „Universités transatlantiques“ to Kemény with warm words of dedication, which Kemény read with great interest and from which he took many notes. He primarily agreed with stressing the pedagogical value of physical education, pacifism and the universality of human relationships. Correspondence between Kemény and Coubertin became more intensive after January 1894. Coubertin, in his letter of 4th April and later of 12th April, asked for the names of those who were in favour of the idea of the Olympic Games and later offered the honorary vice-presidency to Kemény.⁴

Kemény, as a decent public officer, informed the under-secretary of state of the Ministry of Religion and Public Education, Albert Berzeviczy, and explained to him the advantages of international relationships. The under-secretary supported him. The minister, Albin Csáky, was of a similar opinion, and also thought that the official diplomatic declaration of the case should be avoided, because Vienna would probably have supported the German viewpoint. At the time, Austria-Hungary had a common ministry of foreign affairs. It seemed to be more tactical to put a diplomatically less influential person forward, a person who was well-informed in the matter, spoke languages, but was still a secondary-school teacher from the country. And if there were a problem, the private nature of the relationship could be invoked. And for Kemény the French support meant great prestige in trying to realise his ideas in Eger.

During his stay in Eger, he emphasized the role taken by physical education in education; he organised teaching swimming for pupils - Eger was known as a city of spas - in the winter they made an ice-rink, in the autumn and spring they made excursions to the nearby hills. Once he organised Olympic Games based on the ancient model of the pentathlon.

Thus Kemény had the moral support from the Hungarian Ministry of Culture, yet he did not receive any financial contribution; thus he did not travel to the founding congress of the International Olympic Committee. Maybe this was his „luck“, because as Coubertin mentions in his memoirs, he intentionally nominated more members in the forming committee from those people who were not present. He could also be certain of Kemény's identical way of thinking.⁵

Coubertin sent the program and decisions of the Congress of Paris to Kemény immediately after the congress, who also reflected on this in detail in the columns of the journal, „Magyar Pedagógia“ (Hungarian Pedagogy) which was

3 Cf. Kutassi, László: Die Olympische Bewegung in Osterreich und Ungarn von den Anfängen bis 1918, p. 132.

4 Cf. Keresztényi József: Iratok a MOB történetéhez. Budapest 1970, pp. 49-50.

5 Cf. Coubertin, Pierre de: Olimpiai emlékek. In: Testnevelés, 1932. V.évf. 6-7.sz. p. 421. (Mémoires Olympiques, Lausanne 1932)

published in Budapest. It turns out from his commentary that he himself was surprised at the success of the congress, that the proposal also supported by him was not only an idea, a utopia, but its realisation had come within a distance that could be reached. He also invited Coubertin to the VIIIth International Public Health and Demographical Congress held in Budapest in autumn 1894 so that he could be informed of the preparations for the Olympic Games in person, at which Coubertin's presence was canceled because of his negotiations in Athens.

In 1896 Hungary celebrated the 1000th anniversary of the founding of the Hungarian nation. The preparation for the huge series of celebrations had started years earlier. Budapest had been modernised into a „metropolis“; the road system was modernised, new public and residence buildings were built, new public transportation was introduced, the urban electricity and sewer system were built, and in addition by 1896, the first underground railway of the continent (that is only the second after London) was built.

During his first year at the Ministry of Culture Kemény already mentioned that joining the Olympic movement was a good opportunity for propaganda concerning the thousand-year-old Hungarian nation and the idea of having the Olympic Games in Hungary was also suggested. And since there were problems in Athens concerning organisation, Coubertin suggested the idea of having the Olympic Games in Budapest in his letter written to Kemény in November, 1894. Kemény recommended his earlier patron Albin Csáky, the previous Minister of Culture, as the president of the organising committee. Csáky seriously considered the idea but resigned from his cultural ministership in the summer of 1894. Thus Kemény had to turn to the new Minister of Culture, the famous physician, Loránd Eötvös in December 1894 who, following his advisors' view, turned down the proposal. The argumentation was that if the Greek nation with such a tradition in sports hesitated in the matter, the Hungarians should not take part in such a risky business, which by the way, was a costly one. Kemény received the written refusal only as late as April 1895, signed by the new minister, Gyula Wlassics.⁶

After obstacles had been removed in Athens, Kemény considered the spread of the spirit of the Olympic Games and Hungarian participation in the games as his main tasks. He published a number of articles on the events and resolutions of the Congress of Paris, and his writing on the history of the ancient games was of scholarly character. Even after the organisation of the games in Budapest was put „ad acta“, Kemény wrote a number of petitions to the Ministry of Culture calling the attention to the need for the establishment of the preparatory committee in time.⁷ The Ministry of Culture entrusted a sports club with a long existence, the Nemzeti Torna Egylet (National Gymnastics Club), of which Kemény was a member, to organize a committee for the preparation of the Olympic Games in Athens. Despite Kemény's urging, the Club only convoked the heads of the most notable Hungarian clubs, delaying the decision to form the Hungarian Olympic Committee until the 19th December, 1895. Although with some reservations - concerning mainly the full financing of the Hungarian delegation traveling to the Olympic Games - the Hungarian government agreed to send a delegation.⁸

In the spring of 1896, selective games were held during which competitors were chosen. The delegation was headed by Ferenc Kemény who returned to Hungary - after receiving a Greek award - as the most highly esteemed sports leader. His international recognition was furthered by his continuing publications. His article entitled „Die Bedeutung der Olympischen Spiele für die körperliche Erziehung der Jugend“, published after the Olympic Games, created a great stir, although Kemény was attacked for having published it in Vienna and in German. In the article, he summed up his previous notion on the harmony between mental and physical education, underlying their equality, thus defining the character of the ideal personality.⁹ He believed that the Olympic Games in Athens proved the integral unity of gymnastics, games and athletics, and that they were a model to be followed. This fact did not matter

6 Kemény Ferenc levele Eötvös Lorándhoz. 28th December 1894. TF levéltár.

7 Cf. Tornaügy 1895. XII. évf. 7.sz.

8 Cf. Képviselőházi Napló 30. Budapest 1896. 111.1.

9 Cf. Sport-Világ 1897. IV. évf. 16.sz.

for Kemény for solely academic reasons, but also for personal and existential ones. There was a harsh fight between the „gymnastics“ and the „athletics“ movements in Hungary at that time. A really hostile struggle characterised the relationship between the leadership of the two biggest sports clubs, the National Gymnastics Club (Nemzeti Torna Egylet=NTE) and the Hungarian Athletics Club (Magyar Athletikai Club=MAC). They were contending for top posts in Hungarian sport, including that of the Olympic Committee.¹⁰ Kemény attempted to attract supporters with the power of his articles and academic works with little success. He was so deeply affected by the lack of domestic support that he was contemplating the idea of resignation from his membership in the International Olympic Committee. Coubertin, having been told of this intention by Kemény, tried to dissuade him, writing that he counted on Kemény's presence at the Congress of Le Havre. Kemény did everything to arrange his trip to Le Havre since he was deeply interested in the topics of the Congress, sport pedagogy and sport health. Although he had supported Gebhardt's proposal that the congress be held in Berlin, he was later convinced of the Normandy plan put forward by Coubertin.

In his letter to Kemény, Coubertin wrote on the 19th of December, 1896, that he was trying to do his best for the success of the congress since his aim was that the Olympic Committee be held in high esteem. He added that he had taken Kemény's proposal into consideration, although he had altered its wording. As Coubertin noted in his memoirs, the plan of the Universal Olympic Association and of the bulletin in several languages were included in the program in order to „please our Hungarian colleague, Ferenc Kemény, who had been so ambitious in his plans.“¹¹

In his letter to Kemény of July 1897, Coubertin - after some personal information - wrote about his lasting illness and asked Kemény to give a welcome speech in the name of the foreign participants following his opening address.¹²

Kemény's participation in the work of the Congress of Le Havre was supported by the Hungarian Ministry of Culture, so Kemény wrote a lengthy report and even published the important events of the congress on the pages of the most widely read sports magazine of the age, Hercules.¹³ He commented on the interesting lectures and reported enthusiastically of M. Bonvalot's presentation, which he considered to be the highlight of the conference. He also praised other lectures and called attention to the rhetorical abilities of Abbot Didon. Evaluating the lectures - one claiming the priority of „free game“, the other the advantages of „commanded exercises“ - Kemény concluded that the sharp division between the two trends was a futile one. In his report, he gave voice to his satisfaction with the unanimous declaration of the unity between gymnastics, athletics and games, that was followed by Coubertin's speech in support of unity. This reassured him that the so-called system of physical education, that was in the making in Hungary, was the right path. Kemény analysed the Hungarian state of affairs in physical education at school and the training of the teachers of physical education. In his lecture, he reported the success of the 6-8 week long holiday games and gymnastic courses organised for teachers who had not specialised in physical education. He called attention to the need for the real financial and moral appreciation of the teachers of physical education, a motion which was adopted. Kemény also noted those themes in his report that should have been dealt with, but had not, at the Congress of Le Havre. These were: the role of singing and music in physical education, the physical education of girls, and the inadequacy of the two-hour physical education classes at schools. He found it important that a Department of Physical Education was created within the framework of the Ministry of Culture, and he hoped that Hungary would be among the first countries to adopt this proposal. (Kemény's proposal was realised not until 1913.)

10 Cf. Szikora, Katalin: Ungarn schickte eine starke Mannschaft. In: Lennartz, K. und Mitarbeiter: Die Olympischen Spiele 1896 in Athen. Erläuterung zum Neudruck des offiziellen Berichts. Kassel 1996. pp. 85-87.

11 Coubertin, Pierre de: Olimpiai Emlékek. In: Testnevelés 1932. V.évf. 12.sz. p. 865.

12 Cf. Keresztényi, József: Iratok a MOB történetéhez. Budapest 1970, p. 116. (1897. július 17).

13 Herkules, 5th November 1897, p. 170. 20th November 1897, pp. 175-177.

In a letter of August, 1897, Coubertin asked Kemény to reconsider the idea of his resignation and mentioned that he knew about the articles published in the Austrian and Hungarian press attacking the Olympic Games and, at times, Kemény in person. Exactly for this reason and for the success of the impending Olympic Games in Paris, Coubertin asked Kemény to propagate the idea of the games in Hungary and in Austria. In June 1899, Coubertin informed Kemény of the settlement of the dispute between the organisers of the world exhibition and of the Olympic Games and that his participation in the work of the Organising Committee was the mark of consent. He informed Kemény that he wanted to visit some National Olympic Committees, but unfortunately, Vienna and Budapest were not in his travel plans. He also noted that because the establishment of the standing Austrian Olympic Committee was delayed, Kemény's Austrian activity was of major importance.¹⁴

Reassured by Coubertin, Kemény carried on with his work as the Secretary General of the Hungarian Olympic Committee with unremitting enthusiasm. Commissioned by the Ministry of Culture, he was again the head of the Hungarian delegation sent to Paris where, at Danielle Merillon's request, he worked as a member of the jury.¹⁵

His activity in Paris was followed by acknowledgement, both in political and professional sport circles, although attacks on him also intensified. Kemény, in a number of articles primarily published in professional journals, pledged himself to the amateur spirit of sports and to the continuation of ancient tradition. In these articles he often criticised the achievement-oriented nature and competitive spirit of sport. He was worried, above all, about the growing popularity of soccer, a view which made him unpopular.¹⁶

In 1904, in the absence of Coubertin at the Olympic Games in St. Louis, Kemény represented the International Olympic Committee together with Willibald Gebhardt. Kemény arrived in St. Louis as the head of the Hungarian team of five competitors. He continued to receive the support of Albert Berzeviczy, Minister of Culture, who was an enthusiastic devotee of the cause of the Olympic Games and a supporter of Ferenc Kemény. It was he who entrusted Kemény with the official representation of Hungary at the Congress of Brussels in 1905.

Before the „Hellenic Olympic Games” of 1906, attacks on Kemény further intensified. Assaults were directed by the Hungarian Athletics Club (MAC), a club of growing reputation and a widening team of competitors who totally neglected Kemény during preliminary discussions. Therefore, Kemény did not take part in the games in Athens. As member of the International Olympic Committee he continued to solicit the financial support of the Minister of Religion and Public Education for the 1908 Olympic Games in London. He also asked the Minister to entrust him to be head of the Hungarian team. Nevertheless, he did not hold any positions in the Hungarian Olympic Committee after 1904.¹⁷

In March 1907, Kemény received information from Coubertin concerning the date of the session in the Hague, and Coubertin wrote that he hoped that they would meet there. At the same time, the Hungarian Athletics Association complained in its letter to the Minister of Culture of the sphere of authority that the representative of the International Olympic Committee had according to the new charter of the Hungarian Olympic Committee in 1904. As a result of this, Kemény announced his resignation from his membership in the Hungarian Olympic Committee and resigned from his international post as well. On the occasion of the acceptance of his resignation he sent an open letter to the editor-in-chief of Sport-Világ. In it he wrote: „I hope that at the expense of my sport-harakti peace of olympism would be restored.”¹⁸

After Kemény's resignation from the IOC, two Hungarian members were elected, Géza Andrassy in 1907 and Gyula Muzsa in 1909.

14 Cf. Keresztényi, József: Iratok a MOB történetéhez. Budapest 1970, p. 119. (1900. június 3).

15 Ibid., p. 124. (1900. június 10).

16 Cf. Kemény, Ferenc: Utazás a football körül. Őszinte szavak. In: Tornaügy, 1899-1900. XVII. évf. 10.sz. pp. 153-158.

17 Cf. Keresztényi, József: Iratok a MOB történetéhez. Budapest 1970, pp. 126-133.

18 Sport-Világ, 1907. XVI. évf. 16.sz. p. 133.

After 1907, Kemény's withdrawal was complete, although he visited London privately in 1908, he did not meet anyone, as Coubertin mentioned with regret in his letter to Kemény in September. In 1909 and 1910, Coubertin inquired in a few friendly letters whether Kemény was receiving the issues of „Revue Olympique“ and hoped that they would meet at the Budapest session of IOC in 1911. Coubertin closed his letter of April in the following way: *“I will never forget the past, my dear and loyal colleague, and I will remind you of it in Budapest without repeating the blunder at Le Havre, the memory of which I cannot erase from my heart as it did not disappear from yours either.”* (Coubertin referred to the accident when he wanted to call upon Kemény to give his welcome speech mentioned above, but he could not recall his name.)¹⁹

Subsequently, he devoted his time solely to his pedagogical studies and became the editor of the „Encyclopedia of Pedagogy“ published in Budapest in 1934. Then he published his rather subjective memoirs in 1936 on the pages of Magyar Világ. In 1933, the last piece of correspondence ended with Coubertin's words: *„Your letter really gave delight to me, your writing has not changed. However, I disagree with your attempts to distance yourself from me as you have done since our meeting in Budapest in 1911, where I had so much pleasure meeting you. The games did not cease to develop and our creation - which you have a part in, I will never forget - honors us.”*²⁰

The circumstances of Kemény's death during the Second World War, in 1944, were shrouded in mystery for a long time. According to his son's communication, he committed suicide together with his wife trying to escape from the horrors of the war.

His activities and his role in the international movement of the Olympic Games were forgotten after the Second World War; it was known only for the historians of sports. The reinvigorated international and Hungarian interest on the 100th anniversary of the Olympic Games turned attention to his personality. A sports hall in Eger was named after him, and in June this year a statue was erected in his honour. At the Hungarian University of Physical Education in Budapest there is also a statue of Kemény.

Kemény was an outstanding figure of the history of pedagogy and sports history who has won recognition primarily for his theoretical works and publications.²¹ His activities in sport politics and sport diplomacy have brought him less success in Hungary than abroad. Perhaps he lacked Coubertin's sense of diplomacy, although Kemény could have found this if he had „read between“ Coubertin's lines.

It is due to Kemény's work that a small nation like Hungary, which did not have independent statehood at that time, could be present at the birth of the international olympic movement that has become a world-wide movement. And it was due to Ferenc Kemény's activity that one could report on behalf of the Hungarian people at this conference.

Résumé

Ferenc Kemény et l'Idéal olympique hongrois

Ferenc Kemény est né le 17 juillet 1860 à Nagybecskerek (aujourd'hui Zrenjanin en Yougoslavie). Après sa scolarité à Budapest, il fait des études à Stuttgart et à Paris pour devenir professeur de mathématiques et physique ainsi que de langue française. C'est à la Sorbonne qu'il rencontrera Coubertin de quelques années son cadet. Il partagea avec lui ses idées et ses efforts qui permirent de promouvoir le sport et l'éducation physique. Lorsqu'il rentra en Hongrie, il gagna sa vie comme professeur dans différentes écoles, entre autre à Eger puis à Budapest. Au début

19 Keresztényi, József: Iratok a MOB történetéhez, Budapest 1970, pp. 225-226. (1911. április 8).

20 Ibid., p. 406. (1933. július 24).

21 Cf. Kemény, Ferenc / Kovács, Rezső: A testi nevelés állapota a magyarországi középiskolákban. Budapest 1899, p. 118.

des années 90 du siècle dernier il se fit en Hongrie, le promoteur des idées et buts de Coubertin. Celui-ci le choisira comme partenaire quand il s'agira de rétablir les J.O.. Il ne participera pas, cependant, en personne au Congrès de fondation. Comme beaucoup d'autres membres du C.I.O. tout neuf constitué, il ne fut inscrit que sur la liste des membres d'honneur du Congrès.

Kemény déploya des efforts importants pour rendre public la manifestation en Hongrie et en Autriche. D'Athènes (1896) jusqu'à St. Louis (1904) il fut l'organisateur de la délégation olympique hongroise. En 1907 il se retira officiellement et d'une façon décisive du CIO. Il s'occupa ainsi de la situation de l'éducation physique dans les écoles hongroises et à la fin de sa vie pouvait être fier de pouvoir présenter une longue série de publications. Il mourut pendant la deuxième guerre mondiale à Budapest le 21 Novembre 1944.