

THE BIG INTERNATIONAL FENCING COMPETITION AT THE YEAR OF THE FIRST OLYMPIC GAMES

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ABSTRACT. Due to the proximity of the dates, in 1896 fencers had to make a choice, where to go to compete, at this time an amateur Olympics event or for grand prize at World Expo in Budapest. The best fencers had chosen the second opportunity. According to Carpathian experts, the Keresztessy fencing system was the best in the whole world, so the audience couldn't wait to be successful on the competition. This was the first time when the Carpathian and Italian fencing styles were compared. The belief in the invulnerability of Carpathian athletes was shattered when no one of them came to the top of the podium as a result of the competition. At the first major international competition Carpathian fencers were forced to their knees.

Keywords: *Keresztessy, Italo Santelli, fencing styles, Millenial contest*

Introduction

One month later at the end of the first Olympic games, the largest international fencing competition of the year was held in the Carpathian. The best fencers of the age preferred to choose the competition in the Carpathian, which featured valuable prizes, then the 'nameless' Olympic Games. This also shows well the difficult situation of the Olympic Games in the initial time.

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Even then, fencing was one of the oldest sports activities, with a long tradition throughout the Carpathian Basin. For centuries, it has been an important part of combat military activity and preparation, and then in the 19th century, duel-based fencing also appeared in the Carpathian Basin, which can be considered a forerunner of the sport of fencing.

The first fencing masters came from abroad. The first public fencing school was opened by master Biassini in 1824 in Cluj-Napoca. Only then did the National Fencing Institute open in Pest in 1825, headed by elder Fridrich. Biassini, Ignacz Clair, Ferenc Fridrich, Lui Chappon, Nándor Martinengo created the unstructured system of fencing schools in the Carpathian Basin, and thanks to them and their students, duel-fencing started to be popular across the Carpathian Basin. During the 19th century clubs opened in a row, and a Carpathian style appeared. József Keresztessy has been a fencing assistant since the age of 13, he studied from almost the every Carpathian master, and he created his own style which became dominant in the Carpathian by the end of the 19th century. This style matched white the Italian style, which presented by fencing masters of Scula Magistrale.

Experts at the time believed that the Carpathian Keresztessy style was the most effective in swordsmanship, so organizers had made the largest international fencing competition of the year the millennium events (1896) at the time, with they wanted to prove their leadership in swordsmanship. In fact, it was the first international sports competition for Carpathian Basin competitors, which concluded with important lessons and triggered a change in the Carpathian Basin fencing society, which resulted in the creation of a new style that later became dominant in international fencing life.

Materials and Methods

The research examined and compared the speciality of the dominant fencing style of the age. The research performed a descriptive and an exploratory study to analyze the historical events highlighted the 1896 international fencing competition by the contemporary press.

As you explore the history of 19th-century sport and culture, you must find all the clues that indirectly give you an insight into the past and the sporting events of that time. When working on this topic, the research will focus primarily on exploring the history of sports through the following methods:

Archial research is the most difficult part of the job since accessing the matrial preserved in the Hungarian State Archives is rather difficult because the decisions of the Ministry of the Interior were destroyed in 1956.

Searching for museum collections attempts to replace the data of all regulations, decisions, official reports that have been destroyed in archival materials or which are impossible to search. By locating and mapping the documents in the library of the Physical Education and Sports Museum in Budapest, we can get an authentic picture of everything that happened during the research period. The exhibited material contains rich treasures of sports history, unfortunately these memories are also scattered, as these memories and values are usually part of separate exhibition materials. The material of the Hungarian Museum of Physical Education and Sport is the starting point of my research, because fortunately there is a lot of material about the 19th century sports life.

Lexicons, encyclopedias are collections of information that can be general, comprehensive, or thematic. Although they do not provide detailed information, headings and brief explanations are important points in the research.

Sport-related monographs, as well as sports memos and diaries, usually contain a lot of important information, but their most important feature is subjectivism, so this analysis requires duplication of work, to verify the authenticity of the information.

Since the 1800s, contemporary newspapers have published columns on the most important aspects of social life, including information on sporting events. The 1896 Millennium is a series of events well documented by the newspapers.

There is a strong correlation between sport and its determinants, often a biography hides information that is relevant to the history of sport: We know from the life of Gaetano Biassini that he had working as a fencing teacher in Cluj-Napoca for 6 years, when his fencing school was opened in 1924.

The modern trend in historiography is the introduction of age through biography. The period under investigation is decisive for the work of several prominent personalities. For example, József Keresztessy is the epitome of 19th-century Carpathian fencing.

Result

The Keresztessy Style

In Middle Europe, the contemporary famous fencing styles were present in sports life thanks to the foreign masters' appearance (Friedrich, Chapon, Barbesetti, Clair). Keresztessy created his own style by summarizing and simplifying these styles; that we can call Keresztessy style. His fencing essentially was the one that Friedrich's fought and Chapon described in his comprehensive

work. This wrist-fencing that was extended by the French and was accepted by the Germans – in contrary to the Italian, later trendy fencing that used lower arm movements – was really complicated. Keresztessy simplified it, poured Hungarian soul into it. This fencing style, soaked by the personality of Keresztessy, was called the Hungarian fencing, then in the following generation it still existed, but later it stayed as a nice memory (Siklóssy, 1928).

The Keresztessy's fencing was built on active defence at that time (defence and quick retort). It took the dynamism needed for the retort from the wrist, waited for the attack motionless, typically in fencing base-standing. Stepping back was considered cowardice, which did not fit into the knight's mentality. 'It seems like that by our nature, we do not sympathies nor with the French, neither the Italian retrograding, circling, squatting or side-jumping defensive and attacking fencing style. We barely step back even in the dagger fencing, indeed, we see virtue in not giving up the standing. In the sword fencing, we just need a huge attack to make us leave our position.' (Porzso, 1887) It meant that they tried to defend every attack by the sword with the least amount of movements; this is how using the wrist to move the sword and a high level of defence could be developed. 'The Hungarian fencers defend everything and perform art during conscious, hedged, quick retors.' (Vészi, 1896a) According to Keresztessy 'the legs fence as the hands do', he emphasized strongly the leg. His school was characterised by simplicity and clearness. (Szabó, 2017) József Keresztessy had died in 1895. The style that he created influences the Carpathian fencers' styles in these decades.

His son, Sándor Keresztessy continued his work and had been a teacher since 1869. First in the National Gymnastics Club, later he was a master at the Ludovika, in the years of 1890 he had his own fencing room. He was a member of the jury at the huge international competitions in 1895-1896, when he was already older than 50.

One of his favourite students was Lajos Vay, who took the József Keresztessy-room and the guard. His pupils also participated in the outstanding fencing contests in 1895 and 1896. He is considered as the heritor of the Keresztessy-system. (Gáspár, 1908)

József Keresztessy gave fencing master certification only to three masters in his life. Besides the two mentioned above, Mihály Bély was the last one whose certificate was signed by Keresztessy. As a real all-around sportsman, he did many sports, among them skiing, high jump, football, etc. He also took part in the Millennial Competition in the master category. These three men can be seen as the successors of Keresztessy.

Italian style

After 1868 a new Italian fencing style was formed, which Keresztessy could not meet. Then Giuseppe Radaelli became the head of the Military Cavalry Fencing School in Milan, and he created his school the Scuola Magistrale. As a consequence of united Italy (1870) the school moved to Rome. The masters from this school spread his technique all around Europe. "His appearance meant revolution when he made extraordinary changes in sword fencing as he made the elbow to the cornerstone of control. Before that, people fought with stiff arms, but by this, fencing became easier and more secure (Soproni, 1975). The essence of his school was that the newly-developed light sword was controlled not from the wrist, but from the elbow as the blade is the continuation of the arm; this gave bigger space to the leg-techniques. (Nagy, 1907) In his style, the first defense line in attacks and protection was the leg; during attacks, the leg 'jumps' towards, while when it defences it 'jumps' back. One of the weapons of this fencing was the swiftness, the leg movements were quick and diversified (Adorján, 1896).

In contrary to the Keresztessy style, Italians liked to stab with the curved-blend swords. Instead of stiff standing, the quick legwork made diversity possible for the Italian fencers. As a result of their flexible, fast and multifarious movements they performed attacker, almost aggressive fencing. "They could attack with marvellous braveness and strength, and the opponent is lost who could be attacked by them. But they do not have a defensive system at all; or if they do, it is just because their strong muscles in their legs so they can jump back from cuts and stabs efficiently" (Vészi, 1896a).

Due to its spectacularity and effectiveness, it could spread all over Italy; furthermore, it conquered the whole world. As part of the new, modern sports movement, there started to be international competitions more often to allow the Italian masters and amateurs to prove their system's superiority. They took part in numerous contests (fencing academies, competitions with a prize, etc.), and following them the most successful Italian fencers got invitations, job offers to the sports clubs, schools. Italian masters started to work in many cities: In Vienna: Barbasetti, Della Santa, Franceschini, in Prague: Santelli Horatia, in Trieste: Tagliapietra, in Paris: Conte, in Berlin: Schiavonni, in Frankfurt: Gazzera, in Mainz: Tagliabo, in Hamburg: Galante, in Buenos Ayres: Pini, also in London there was one, in Philadelphia there were two, in New York there were three Italian masters. In the area of the Kingdom of Hungary there was Santelli, Toricelli, Gennari in Budapest, Armentani in Szeged, Majone in Kosice, Piacenti in Targu Mures, Biase Erncesto started to teach in Fiume (Nagy, 1907).

“Although the list above seems to be an army of virtuous Italian masters and teachers, Italy fully provided with many great masters. . . The development and the fame of Italian fencing are exactly caused by the huge number of its fencers. In every city and village, there is at least one good master and 10-15 excellent fencers. They consider it a shame if someone cannot fence. Being a first-class fencer is a big honour. But duels are rare so the fencing-fever has nothing to do with this barbarous tradition. They fight for art and their nation’s glory. The result is: To conquer the world” (Nagy, 1907).

The International Fencing Competition four weeks later than the first Olympic Games

In 1896, Millennium events were held around the Carpathian Basin. The center of the events included the exhibition and programs in Budapest.

The Exhibition hosted many sports competitions and congresses. There was chess, shooting contest, regatta on the Danube, athletics competition, gymnastics ceremony, cycling and international fencing races too (Kőváry, 1897).

These international competitions can be seen as the age’s world championship because at that time there were no international associations leading the sports life. The Olympic Movement had also started this time, and the first Modern Olympic Games were held between 6-15 April 1896; where the Carpathian and the Italian fencers did not participate because the date of the Budapest Contest was too close and they had to decide which one to take part on. It describes the struggles of the Olympic Games well, that the best fencers chose the Millennial Contest instead of the Olympics in Athen.

Antecedents of the Millennial Fencing Competition

According to the contemporary view ‘our weapon is the sword’ (Halász, 1896a), so in fencing, the organisers wanted to prove the superiority of the Hungarian sword. It is proved, that the contemporary writings bond together the importance of the sword and the fate: ‘Our ancients got our homeland by weapons, their descendants were able to keep it by weapons and to bloom it with peace.’ (Füzesséry, 1896f) The dagger fencing was not really important for the organisers mentality at that time, it was traditionally considered French.

The Italian fencing’s fame was spreading, they also got invited besides the French fencers to the Millennial Events in 1896.

From the Carpathian side, there was a serious preparation for the Millennial Competition.

The Hungarian Athletic Club organised the I. National Fencing Competition in 1895, where they could estimate the number of the fencers and their potential. Already in this event, the deficiency of the Carpathian fencing appeared. The students of the Keresztessy School met with fencers who used Italian style: Ámon Gregurics, Baron Jenő Bothmer. Gregurics won the masters' sword fencing, while he won the second place in dagger fencing; Zsiga Halász won it who was the student of Keresztessy. Jenő Bothmer did not participate with the masters, but he won against Zsiga Halász so he deserved the gold medal from Budapest (Balogh, 1895).

Gregurics and Bothmer started to learn the Italian style from Luigi Barbasetti in a Military Fencing School in Vienna. Barbasetti came from the Scuola Magistale, Rome in 1894 to Vienna and started his teaching activity. He was the outstanding figure of the International Competition in Prague in 1895, after that, the leading of the Vienna fencing life got into his hands. (Nick, no date)

In 1895 the backwardness of the Keresztessy-school was still not obvious. Zsiga Halász won the masters' dagger fencing without getting any stabs. His pupil, Gyula Iványi won the amateur's competition, the national gold medal and the Silver Cup from the Secretary of Defense. In their success it may have contributed that they had met with the Italian style before, they already knew it a bit. Zsiga Halász was fencing with local masters while he was in Genova, but in the last two decades he was the follower only of the Keresztessy-school. Iványi was fighting against Italians during his fencing-study tour in 1894, for example against Rossi, the pupil of Radelli, and against Giroladini who was widely liked before 1896.

Károly Fodor was also the representative of the international fencing in Hungary. He started to learn from Clair, then Sztrákay and Zsiga Halász were also his masters. In 1887 he looked for Austrian and German fencing masters. In 1888 he ended up with Italian and Swiss masters. His students also participated in the Millennial Contest.

Besides organising competitions, they sent the best fencers to international challenges to collect information about the opponents.

Thus there were Budapest-Vienna fencing matches already in 1895, also directly before the Millennial competition on 28th March in the Fencing Academy in Vienna, where the best fencers of the sport attended and they fought mostly with the military fencing school's followers (Barbasetti school). (Halász, 1896c) This is how Oszkár Fery, Ervin Mészáros, Gyula Kerékgyártó from the HAC, the Gáspár brothers from Lord Arlow's school, Alajos Bay from the Fodor-Rákossy school could travel abroad; Bódog Balogh, Zsiga Halász and Gyula Iványi also participated in the academy (Füzesséry, 1896a).

Also, the HAC invited Barbasetti to Budapest at the beginning of 1896. He was fighting with his opponents one by one successively. With dagger he fought with Kerékgyártó, Kálmán Lakner, Lord Arlow master, using sword he fought with Oszkár Fery, Bódog Balofg and with Iványi. Iványi succeeded to do three cuts on the arms to prove the high level of the Kersztessy fencing school. But he achieved apparent superiority against a tired opponent (Füzesséry, 1896e). Zsiga Halász could not take part in the meeting due to his illness.

It is well illustrated that the most successful fencers participated in many competitions at that time already and tried to earn foreign experiences. By their previous experiences, they had seen the greatness of the Italian style, but they did not recognise the deficiency of their old style. As Halász wrote about the 1896 competition: 'As we can see, the followers of the Italian style prove the most conspicuously that a lot of running does not make sense, because if they are willing to fight for two hits with relatively little moves for a horribly long time and they do not touch each other during this; the leg-work is very incomprehensible because it is just a waste of energy and it tires the lungs.' (Halász, 1896b) For this reason, the Carpathian fencers used the older, Keresztessy school in the Millennial competition.

It is typical of the belief in the supremacy of the Carpathian school that Lajos Vay (the trainer of the Keresztessy Guard) only asked the foreign opponents for friendly practicing just at the last moment before the competition; he only noticed then the greatness of the opponent's knowledge.

The Millennial International Fencing Contest

The Millennial International Fencing Contest was opened on 13 May 1896, the matches were between 14-20 and there was a fencing academy on the 20th of May. From the 140 participants, 232 application arrived in the master and the amateur categories in sword and dagger fencing. Although the opening ceremony was in the Casino of the HAC, the competition was held in the area of the Exhibition in the Hall of Feasts. (Füzesséry, 1896f) The participants were divided into masters and amateurs.

Among the competitors were all the Carpathian fencers who could be considered, who had already proved their suitability. So among the 85 amateurs were Menotti Réthy, Gyula Iványi, Ervin Mészáros; among the masters: Ámon Gregurich, Lajos Vay, Lord Gusztáv Arlow, Károly Chappon, Zsiga Halász, Mihály Bély and Jenő Bothmer. The Austrian, Czech, Polish, Moravian, Spanish delegates represented their countries (Rákosi, 1896), there was the world-famous French dagger-fencer master, the left-handed Lucien Merignac, and three outstanding amateur and the three most excellent masters Italo Santelli, Giuseppe Nadi and

Angelo Torricelli fought for Italy's glory (Füzesséry, 1896f). Miklós Horthy, a naval officer (a student of Toricelli) came from Pola to the contest. He participated very well as an amateur in dagger-fencing. (He was later the Governor of Hungary (1920-1944) (Ottlik, 1934).

According to the rules of the fight, the results were judged by the jury. A clean hit scored 1 point (touché). Four hits meant winning. During sword fencing, it was allowed to stab under the headline until the line of the waist. They had to stop after every hit. (Füzesséry, 1896d) The jury of the competition consisted Carpathian and Italian masters as well. The jury's president was Ferenc Kiss Kisbaári, who was helped by others, from the Carpathian side: Sándor Keresztessy, from the Italian side Commendator Gelli and Barbasetti Luigi (Füzesséry, 1896c).

The competition started with classification according to the order used at that time (during the classification they did not count the given and gotten scores, only the beauty of the movements was observed), from where only the best could go to the next round, which had already been counted in a straight knockout system (until four hits).

After the four days long competition the jury announced who was awarded 1st to 2nd and 3rd class. Among the amateurs, Gyula Iványi, Ervin Mészáros, Oszkár Fery, Jenő Metzler and Kornél Gáspár received gold, among foreigners Bordi Emilio, Florencz; Calabresi Eduardo, Milan; Geccertni Santi, Florenz; Galli Francesco, Florenz; Ottó Gellinek, Premzyl; Gusztáv Kuchta, Vienna-Újhely; Oszkár Mayer, Vienna-Újhely; Minas Alberto, Trieste; Müller Camillo, Vienna; Pál Orbán, Vienna-Újhely; Piacenti Marco, Florenz; Baron Ferenc Pongrácz, Vienna-Újhely; Raus Frigyes, Lemberg; Baron Frigyes Reichlin-Meldégg, Vienna-Újhely; József Schlechta, Vienna-Újhely; György Szarvassy, Vienna-Újhely; knight John Trankwelli Umlauf, Vienna-Újhely; noble Béla Zulawski, Vienna-Újhely (Porzsolt, 1896). All of the masters received the first-class status, so they all took part in the straight-knockout phase.

"Two fencing modes faced each other in the race, the more serious, strong-cut, stiff warlike-fencing with the heavier weapon and "the more agile, rhapsodic, more prick and pinch Italian mode' with a lighter weapon 'in which the flexible and elastic feet also have an important role to play, and the fencers also seem to accompany their cuts with heated exclamations" (Rákosi, 1896).

First, there was the amateur sword-fencing competition featuring 24 first-class and 44 second-class fencers, "which was run with great discomposure. . . the atmosphere became lively and excited". The strongly patriotic audience was very disappointed by the fact that the best of their forces were successively defeated by the Italians in their unusual but undeniably successful fencing. "By the third round, it was obvious that the foreigners would win because Galli was

the only Italian who lost and from the best Hungarians only Fery, Iványi and Pórtreleky stayed in. . . ' During the third round Iványi defeated Pórtreleky, Piacenti won against Fery. 'By the fourth round the two best Italians, Ceccherini and Piacenti met and Ceccherini went towards from them to the best four with Müller Dr. , Iványi and Ceni Cino. Finally, the best Hungarian and the best Italian fencer, Ceccherini stayed in the fight for the first place. The excitement reached its peak; the Italian attacked with lightning speed and Iványi's pre-cuts failed against them. The Italian cuts, due to their light, flexible sword, fell several times flat (invalid cutting surface), which avoided the jury's attention. After several clashes, they stood like this: Ceccherini got one hit, Iványi got three (so the Italian fencer led). Baranyi representative, member of the jury tried to draw the jury's attention to the articles of the competition rules concerning flat cuts and asked for their application, which the jury acknowledged too late. Other fierce clashes led again to hits on both sides. Finally, the jury warned Ceccherini who did not think about defending, and in the next attack he waited for Iványi's offensive, a side cut; the cut bounced off the defence and hit Ceccherini's side, who attacked back with a head cut. The debate broke out again, with some saying that the Italian had got the cut earlier, so his head cut was too late, while the others thought that Ceccherini had cut back after a clear defence. The mood was so excited that the president of the jury put an end to the fight for that day, also because of the overrunning time. After the audience had left, the jury decided that Ceccherini was the winner. On the following day, Müller Dr. won the third, Ceni Cino the fourth place" (Füzesséry, 1896b).

The first cold shower was followed by the masters' competition. There the followers of the Keresztessy school: Vay, Bély, Halász already fall out in the first round, but to tell the truth, their opponents knew the Italian fencing as Bothmer and Gregurics. At the second round, Lord Arlow loses against the Italian Nadi, but during the match, a heated debate ensued following a hit by Nadi. Barbasettin and Nadi both left the piste and after the jury's decision, they could follow the fencing in the afternoon with cool heads. (Vészi, 1896b) Already in the second round, Italo Santelli appears with his chivalry manners and acts, who always said if he got hit. In the third round, he defeated Nadi Guisuppe, who was considered as a possible winner among the masters. Thus Jenő Bothmer, Ámon Gregurics and Santelli went to the final and Santellini 'after an interesting match won against Gregurics quickly. But it was more difficult against Baron Jenő Bothmer. The Lieutenant with Hercules's strength defended with astonishing perseverance, and Italo was barely able to access it. The match was as heated and strong, that they had to have a break after every hit. Bothmer got the first cut, but in the next round Italo. . . then Bothmer again. . . in the fourth one Italo. . . then Bothmer. . . and again Italo got hit by the sword. The audience

and the jury breathlessly waited for the final hit. . . Bothmer was about to hit and lifted his arm when Italo Santelli suddenly stretched out his arm and won with a beautiful breast stab. '(Vészi, 1896b) 'Italo Santelli won as he wanted' (Füzesséry, 1896b), and with this, he made it obvious that the Italian fencing style, the lighter sword, the sports-like fencing is superior in contrary to the war-like Keresztessy style. This also brought a decisive turn in the history of universal fencing.

After these, the amateur competitions took place where the disappointment and despondency were felt on the Carpathian fencers. There was no Carpathian among the best fours at all. In the amateur category, the Italians won all the places: Piacenti Marco (Florence) won, Ceni Cino (Florence) was the second, the third was Minas Alberto (Trieste) and Galli Francesco (Florence) was the fourth.

The last was the masters' dagger contest, where the "amazing' Lucien Merignac won. 'He faced with excellent opponents but did not get any hits; however, he stabbed his opponent every time with such security and ease that he won the undivided admiration of the audience. Indeed, he was far above the other fencers. Merignac was a tall, thin man; also left-handed which contributed his superiority a lot' (Füzesséry, 1896b).

Discussion

After the Millennial Contest

The Carpathian fencers forced to their knees. The Keresztessy fencing system, which until then was considered perfect, lost against the Italian one.

But the best masters did not accept their subordinate position, and therefore they learnt the – proven – more efficient fencing. For this purpose, the Hungarian Athletic Club first hired the best Italian, the winner Italo Santelli as their trainer. They invited many Italians to the Carpatian, whose education fell on fertile soil. Consequently, masters - besides Santellini - arrived: Torcelli, Gennari, Armentani to Szeged, Majone to Kosice, Piacenti to Targu Mures, Biase Ernesto to Fiume. (Nagy, 1907)

The conscientious work had started, whereupon the Carpathian active, defender, 'pre-cut' technique set blends into the Italian system. This is how the new style was born, which 12 years after the Millennial Contest introduced itself at the Olympics; where five out of the best six fencers were Carpathian. (*Fechtschule in 16th-century Germany: Excerpt from the secret history of the sword*, 2010) Carpathian fencers won not only individually, but they defeated the Italians in team too.

In addition to the talent of Carpathian athletes, masters who were not born in Carpathian contributed to this success, they created here, in this atmosphere a sports culture that became determinative in national and international sports life.

Conclusion

The period between 1896 and 1908 illustrate well that in a sport the creation of a new atmosphere, a new culture, over a generation, but still able to change the position and the role of the nation's athletes in the world. Such was Italo Santelli and the Italian masters, who brought a new movement culture into the life of the Carpathian fencing. Such was the community of the Charpathian fencers, who were able to learn from their defects and provided an environment for Carpathian sport to change and develop.

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