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**GYMNASTICS AND THE IDEOLOGICAL MOVEMENT  
OF FRIEDRICH LUDWIG JAHN**

**Key words:** apparatus gymnastics, Eiselen, French occupation, prohibition, German gymnastic system.

ABSTRACT

Friedrich Ludwig Jahn took the gymnastics of the Charitists (*Philanthropists*) and after having added a plethora of new elements he supplemented it with a patriotic and socio-political ideology. In this way he created a new art of gymnastics and an ideological movement called “*Turnbewegung*”, which became the cornerstone of Apparatus Gymnastics and also of the German Gymnastics System. The dominating class of that time did not welcome the ideological grounds of this gymnastic movement, and in 1819 it became prohibited and Jahn was imprisoned. Many of Jahn’s students escaped abroad where they taught this gymnastic movement, whilst his close collaborator and student, Eiselen, stayed and made various attempts to revive the movement. When after two decades the prohibition was lifted, a rapid new development started, mainly by way of gymnastic societies and demonstrations, which propagated apparatus gymnastics and the German gymnastic system all over the world.

THE IDEOLOGICAL AND GYMNASTIC  
BACKGROUND OF FRIEDRICH LUDWIG  
JAHN – THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE  
FIRST GYMNASIUM

At the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Napoleon Bonaparte, in the name of French Revolution, was conquering one European state after another. Germany was not yet a united state and consisted of numerous autonomous kingdoms and princedoms, many of which were under French rule [15, pp. 25-35]. In the same era, the pedagogical and gymnastic movement of the 18<sup>th</sup>-century Charitists (*Philanthropists*) started to spread across Germany [20, p. 181; 24, pp. 138-142; 1, p. 3]. The Charitists had developed, beside the various events that constituted the basis of ancient

Greek athletics, a number of new suspension, dangle, support, balance and jump exercises on multiple apparatuses [22, pp. 352-353, 358-359].

Influenced by the above mentioned gymnastic trend, and deeply concerned by the defeat of the Prussian army at Jena in 1806, Friedrich Ludwig Jahn (1778-1852) decided to work for the liberation and unification of Germany. He played a leading part in a new gymnastic movement, which had both a national and socio-political background. In 1810 he published his book “The German Nation” (*Deutsches Volkstum*) which was a cry of protest against the French occupation [21, pp. 170-175; 5, p. 16]. In 1811 Jahn opened his first open-air gymnasium (*Turnplatz*) in a small forest near Berlin. He equipped it with dozens of dangle and climbing apparatuses, balance beams,

gymnastics horses, and numerous facilities for other sports [7, p. 99]. In this first gym, as well as in the rest that followed, there were no selections of athletes. All young men, with no exception, and regardless of their social or economic status could take part in this athletic movement, as long as they complied with the rules established by Jahn and his colleagues [22, pp. 10-30].

Two factors mostly contributed to the rise of this gymnastic and ideological movement: first, the trend created by the Charitists gymnastics; and second, occupation of a great part of Germany by Napoleonic France [9, p. 47]. For these reasons why Jahn addressed only young men and excluded women. As Eisenberg (1996) observes, Friedrich Ludwig Jahn, later named "*Turnvater*" (father of gymnastics), attained an unusual popularity particularly among the younger generation of the rising middle classes: students and young skilled artisans. Driven by strong patriotic feelings Jahn was convinced that through sports and especially apparatus gymnastics, the youth of the nation could grow stronger, courageous and above all, competent defenders of their motherland. It was the only way the German nation could gain freedom and make up for the embarrassing French domination [4, pp. 456-457]. Jahn was most likely influenced by the Greek competitive spirit and the belief that gymnastics was necessary in military training [16, pp. 143-154]. It has been generally asserted that ancient Greek athletics did influence the gymnastic movements and ideologies of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century [17, pp. 237-240].

In other words, the motives and goals of Jahn's gymnastics movement were primarily national, ideological-political and military. They were not aimed at humanistic breeding and integration of young citizens. Eisenberg also states that Jahn has been mostly known as an ardent patriot and fanatical Prussian [5, pp. 14-27]. He named his new movement "Patriotic Gymnastics" (*Vaterlaendisches Turnen*). For the same reason he replaced the Greek term "Gymnastics" used by the Charitists with a pure German one, namely "*Turnen*". In fact, Jahn, otherwise a very educated man, had no idea that the term was not at all German, but French with Greek origins [26, pp. 73-74]. It should be remembered that Jahn was the first to speak, write and coin the gymnastic terminology, which he took as a fundamental factor in the development of gymnastics [11, pp. 7-9; 7, p. 99, 171, 197, 271].

In the beginning, athletes used to freely execute various exercises with apparatuses with no technical difficulties; their will and stimulation being their only motives. For Jahn successful execution of a task was not a priority, compared to the usefulness of this task and the intensity of the efforts made.

In the next seven years new gymnastic centers were established in fifty-two cities. This reflected the appeal of the gymnastic movement to the German nation. The movement was later organized into thousands of sport clubs with thousands of members [19, pp. 426, 432]. Similar sport clubs were also founded by the German emigrants all over the world [27, pp. 5-22]. In other German-speaking countries, such as Austria and Switzerland, the German gymnastic movement never reached the level of ideological coherence observed in Germany [18, pp. 562-563]. In 1813 Jahn and his close colleague Frisen invited their trainees (*Turner*) to form the Lutzow Free Corps, a volunteer force in the Prussian army fighting Napoleon. Frisen and a number of other athletes died a heroic death. The following year, after the war, the first great gymnastic show was organized in Jahn's gymnasium (*Heizenheide*) in celebration of the first anniversary of the people's revolution and victory against Napoleon. Many celebrations followed and they included, beside gymnastics, patriotic poetry and music with references to the Motherland, Freedom and Brotherhood. Let us note that those were the ancestors of the great gymnastic events in the big German cities, called "*Turnfeste*" [22, p. 25]. With these shows, Jahn and his students aimed to meet the following goals [7, pp. 99, 171, 197, 271; 10, pp. 118-119]: to demonstrate their stalwartness and high quality skills of their athletes; to show their will to continue their liberation struggle and unite all German states which totaled 216 at that time; and to demonstrate their opposition, wrath, and disobedience to the feudal regimes, which they wanted to abolish.

It seems apparent that this gymnastic movement, which had fascinated and attracted the crowds of young people of the times, was an ideological and political movement mistrusted by the authorities. Thus, this hopeful athletic movement, in the framework of which apparatus gymnastics was born and developed, turned into a nasty adventure for more than a century.

The organization was later incorporated into the Nazi *Deutsche Reichsbund für Leibesübungen*,

which brought an end to the functioning of *Turnen* as an independent social movement, although there still existed in Germany several other *Turnen* organizations, included the anti-Semitic and pro-Nazi *Deutsche Turnerbund*, and a short lived (1848-49) progressive *Demokratische Turnenebund Deutschlands*, initiated by A. Scharttner in Hanau and after the collapse of the Spring of Nations continued by various socialist and revolutionary organizations, all of which were ephemeral, impugned by the German nationalist and military organizations. At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the *Turnen* became part of the program of German labor organizations [18, pp. 562-563].

In 1816 Jahn and his close colleague Eiselen published a book titled "German Artistic Gymnastics" (*Deutsches Turnkunst*), which became the fundamental source of information on gymnastics for all interested in the subject [13]. This book treats numerous athletic events, while dedicating a large part to apparatus gymnastics (ways of training, help, terminology, apparatus, gym construction, etc.) [13, pp. 147-185, 265-277].

Let us note that during this first stage of its development, as well as in the next 100 years, apparatus gymnastics did not constitute a separate event for specialized athletes, but rather a part of the entire German gymnastics system. It is remarkable that the system, which developed due to Jahn's gymnastic movement, elevated apparatus gymnastics, especially the horizontal and parallel bars, to a superior position. Those apparatuses were invented by Jahn in 1812 (at first as primitive auxiliary devices) and developed soon into primary instruments of the German gymnastic system. They have maintained their stature through the gradual specialization of competitive apparatus gymnastics until the present day.

Statistics provides us with information that some stable gymnastics apparatuses from Jahn's time, which have developed (parallel to the exercises) all the way to the present day [7, pp. 99, 171, 197, 271; 22, pp. 10-30; 12, pp. 28; 25, pp. 26, 27, 58; 8, p. 58; 6, pp. 99, 171, 97, 71]. Thus the foundations of gymnastics on stable apparatuses were established, and a little later sport clubs began appearing more frequently (becoming a central element of the German gymnastic system) as well as games and shows were held, in which athletes had to take part in more than one sport discipline, including gymnastics.

## PROHIBITION OF JAHN'S GYMNASTIC MOVEMENT

Once the authorities and the powerful Holy Alliance of the time discovered that Jahn's gymnastics movement possessed an ideological background which opposed their interests a campaign to ban it commenced. As a consequence, the numerous gyms frequented by thousands of youngsters were closed down and Jahn was imprisoned [3, p. 30]. The opportunity for the authorities presented itself in 1819 when one of Jahn's students murdered a contemporary politician and poet named Kotseboe. The gyms were closed down in most German "*Länder*" and Jahn's gymnastics *Turnen* was prohibited.

However, youngsters who loved gymnastics did not renounce the movement. They used to set their own apparatuses in their yards and kept training on them. The apparatuses that were suitable for such small spaces were primarily the horizontal bar, parallel bars and the vaulting horse. It all led to an increase in the popularity of those apparatuses, which proved to be the most popular ones.

Until 1840, when the prohibition was lifted, other important personalities appeared beside the youngsters, who wanted to revive the almost extinct gymnastics in various ways. It should be noted that gymnastics was never prohibited in some German "*Länder*". The most important factor, though, which served the survival of the gymnastics movement was the fact, that some zealous supporters began to exercise indoors and replaced the term "*Turnen*" with the older "Gymnastic" [7, p. 99; 22, pp. 10-30].

This "relocation" into roofed gyms contributed mostly to the development of apparatus gymnastics, since only those apparatuses could fit in the new gyms. Thus, apparatus gymnastics primarily developed in roofed halls, due to political rather than climatic reasons. Later, for more than 100 years gymnastic events were held in open-air sites. The Rome Olympics (1960) was the last time when such events were held in an open stadium.

The prohibition of gymnastics and the persecution of its warmest supporters resulted in some positive consequences as well, since some of Jahn's students moved into other European countries or America, spreading Jahn's gymnastic movement, especially apparatus gymnastics [14, pp. 539-547]. Karl Beck was one of them, who is

now considered to be the first coach of apparatus gymnastics in the U.S.A., while Follen was the first to introduce this discipline in the Harvard University in 1926 [19, pp. 426-432]. Gradually, the number of German political and gymnastic refugees in both North and South America increased, and Beck translated Jahn's book "*German Artistic Gymnastics*" into English. This German-American gymnastics movement led to the establishment of the first German gymnastic club on American soil (1848) named "*Cincinnati Turngemeinde*". In 1850, 13 gymnastic clubs formed the national league under the name "*Socialist gymnastics league of North America*". In 1860 the number of clubs reached 70 with 7.000 athletes and with their headquarters in Saint Ludwig [2, pp. 6-8]. Jahn's gymnastics enjoyed a similar popularity in South America, primarily in Chile and Venezuela, especially after the 1840s [14, pp. 539-547].

#### **Eiselen (1792-1846) manipulatively brings apparatus gymnastics into fencing halls**

During the ban, Eiselen committed himself to preserve Jahn's gymnastics. After years of prohibition, he approached some governmental officials, who were known to support sports and managed to obtain a limited permission to establish a private fencing hall, where he then placed a number of gymnastic horses (to facilitate fencing training) [22, pp. 10-30].

As already mentioned, the term "*Turnen*" given by Jahn to his gymnastics movement was considered to be threatening to the ruling class. Consequently, Eiselen misleadingly named his gymnastics after Guts Muths, e.g. "gymnastic". In addition, the horizontal bars, parallel bars, vaulting horses and climbing ropes began entering the fencing halls. Soon the fencing halls were transformed into apparatus gymnastics halls.

In 1832 Eiselen founded another gymnasium (*Hall*), which was suitably modulated in order to help rehabilitate girls with some sort of physical disability. This was the first women's gym, in which Eiselen attempted to rehabilitate and integrate impaired girls through simple and jocular occupation with various apparatuses [7, p. 30]. Eiselen attempted to adapt the old apparatuses and invent new ones to meet the new needs rising from the Halls. This way, a big step was made toward specialization of apparatus gymnastics, since this

discipline had to adapt to technical requirements and become restrictive. Another important positive effort of Eiselen in the development of apparatus gymnastics was a publication of 46 pictures (*Turntalfeln*) in 1837, in which he exhibited in detail the way of executing many exercises on various apparatuses. In 1838 Eiselen published a small book on methodology and training assistance to the beginners [7, pp. 99, 171, 197; 22, pp. 10-30]. Thus, undoubtedly Jahn's student and prime colleague was active in defending his imprisoned teacher's movement with any legitimate or misleading methods.

#### **THE LIFT OF PROHIBITION. A NEW SPIRIT IN THE GYMNASTIC MOVEMENT**

In 1840, following the unrelenting pressure by eminent scientists (doctors, trainers, pedagogues), as well as by ideological-political organizations, the prohibition was permanently lifted. This initiated a rapid development of apparatus gymnastics, which nobody could stop any more. Clubs and gyms were founded one after another as well as a gymnastic organization with thousands of trainees from all social classes.

The first athletic newspapers were published and the first associations of organized clubs were established both in Germany and in other European countries. Jahn's movement, which originated in Germany, became worldwide.

The highlight of Jahn's movement reestablishment consisted of numerous athletic shows (*Turnfeste*), which ended up being great national athletic celebrations, where apparatus gymnastics played the leading role.

#### **CONCLUSIONS**

- Friedrich Ludwig Jahn is rightly called the father of apparatus gymnastics, since he set up the foundations of this discipline and of the German gymnastics system in general.
- Jahn's motives were athletic, patriotic and socio-political, and their background was the Charistists' gymnastics and the Napoleonic occupation of Germany.
- Training on Jahn's numerous primitive gymnastic apparatuses was free, with no technical requirements or restrictions (their

- main goal was to build body muscles and martial qualities).
- The ruling class, represented by feudalists, denounced Jahn's gymnastics because the ideological-political declarations of this movement were against their interests.
- The prohibition of Jahn's gymnastic movement resulted in the spread of the movement worldwide, as Jahn's students and colleagues were persecuted and found refuge abroad, bringing their knowledge with them.
- The prohibition also caused specialization and technical execution, since gymnastics moved into halls, where mainly apparatus exercises could be performed (unlike track sports, which had to move outdoors).

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