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## **CZECHOSLOVAKIA ON THE XIX OLYMPIC GAMES IN MEXICO IN DUELS WITH SOVIET RIVALS\***

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### SUMMARY

The political and safety situation before the XIX Olympic Games in Ciudad de México was complicated. Many countries threatened to boycott the Games because of the participation of apartheid South African Republic. Political disturbances took place not only in the host country, but also in many worlds' regions and in Czechoslovakia as well. Nevertheless, these circumstances didn't affect the course of the Games. However, they affected the performance of Czechoslovak sportsmen. Despite of many after the August invasion of Czechoslovakia by troops of the Warsaw Pact protests the aggressors participated in the Games. Similarly, the Czechoslovak team set off to Mexico after a short reflection with a goal to do their best to represent the attacked country. The sportsmen of the occupied country won over an unusual sympathy of the local public already at the opening ceremony. Duels with Soviets, representing occupants in the eyes of the world and Czechoslovak people as well, were often quite escalated. The gymnast Věra Čáslavská or the athlete Miloslava Rezková became winners. On the other hand, additional motivation in form of vengeance was tying the hands of the volleyball team and they lost the final match with the Soviet rival easily.

**Keywords:** political situation, military conflicts, Mexico, Soviet Union

### INTRODUCTION

#### **Military Conflict and Disturbances in the World at the Time of the Olympic Games**

Critique by part of the Mexican public due to high costs of holding the Olympic Games, disturbances in the capital of the host country, but also conflicts inside the International Olympic Committee (IOC) concerning the participation of South African Republic<sup>1</sup> – this

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<sup>1</sup> The host country sent to the IOC Headquarters in Lausanne the so called "White book", where the evolution of IOC's regard on the South African issue has been captured. Finally, after 14 hours of negotiation the IOC President A. Brundage sent on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of April 1968 a telegram to 71 members of IOC: "We recommend to cancel the invitation of SAR to the OG 1968" (*Československý sport*, 1968).

was only a part of the problems that the organizers had to cope with before the Games. They could soothe some conflicts at least partially, but they couldn't influence others. Among these was the problem of "world peace". In the times of ancient Olympic Games, the Greeks followed the rule of general sacred truce, the *ekecheiria* (Kössl et al., 2002). The founder of modern Olympic Games and the restorer of many Olympic traditions, Baron de Coubertin, was a realist: in modern times the *ekecheiria* was hardly imaginable. Nevertheless, the modern Olympic Games should contribute to peaceful coexistence among nations. This would be possible only on the basis of wide consensus of world powers, but the end of the 60's was marked by many serious armed conflicts in many places of the world. City mayors of both Olympic metropolis, Hubert Dubedout of Grenoble and Alfredo Corona del Rosal of Ciudad de México, together called for Olympic truce at the beginning of 1968. This call was accepted all around the world with thanks and sympathy... But the situation in many parts of the world at the time of the XIX Olympic Games was very far from peace.

A striking violation of peace principles was represented by the military conflict in Vietnam, where the enemies were supported by both superpowers. At the time of Olympic Games president Nixon began to draw back the troops, but the war was still to last. There wasn't peace inside the USA, neighbour of the host country, either. During the culminant activity of the African American civil rights movement, their leader, pastor Martin Luther King, was murdered in April 1968 in Tennessee. However, the disturbances took place not only at the two world leaders, USA and USSR. In spring of the Olympic year there ran a wave of protests throughout the whole Europe, focused above all against the Vietnam War. The disturbances in Mexico broke out in July 1968. There were different reasons to protest; students themselves declare that the most important was the occupation of Dominican Republic at US President Lyndon Johnson's command in April 1965 (Zarco, 1998). Yet some sources (DANIEL, POPPER) state that the reason was supposed to be the students' disagreement with holding the Games and the related costs, when such a great part of Mexican inhabitants live in poverty. The protests were focused on real as well as presumable power and economical threats, which – for Latin America – were represented by US policy. The student disturbances ended in a bloody tragedy. The massacre took place only ten days before the opening of the Games. In the evening of 2<sup>nd</sup> October 1968, representatives of students protesting especially against social injustice were supposed to meet government negotiators on Tlatelolco to initiate a process of conciliation and searching for compromises. Although the authorities promised not to use armed forces, a conflict broke out in the city centre. As a result, there were many dead protesters. The number of casualties differs considerably; the only thing sure is that there were hundreds of them.

Dramatic events also took place in the hot summer of 1968 in the Soviet power block and in its satellite states. The revival process in Czechoslovakia known as the Prague Spring was sharply terminated by the invasion of the five Warsaw Pact troops under the Soviet command. The IOC received many appeals to disable the aggressor states' participation in the Games in Mexico<sup>2</sup>. The IOC President Avery Brundage refused it vigorously declaring

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<sup>2</sup> Protest of five German citizens from 23/08/1968, IOC Archive; letter from Lambert Carez from 27/08/1968 *ibid*.

that the Games are apolitical and that it is impossible to constantly adopt restrictions of number of participants or sites depending on current domestic or international situation. The board of the Czechoslovak Olympic Committee (ČSOV) discussed this situation on 30<sup>th</sup> August 1968 and decided to take part in the Games as scheduled earlier. Before the departure of the first part of the team the chairman of ČSTV and ČSOV Emanuel Bosák expressed his wish that the sportsmen would represent the country with dignity, although it is hard to conceal that the recent events affected their training and, above all, their state of mind. “Our Olympic team has never been leaving in these conditions. More then ever, this is the representation of Czechoslovak Socialist Republic. We take part in the Games after a thorough consideration and in order to strengthen our country’s position on the international scale” *Československý sport* (1968, p. 1).

### **A Theater called the Olympic Games**

Already the opening of the XIX Olympic Games was special. For the first time in history, it was a woman who brought the Olympic Torch to the stadium. On Saturday 12<sup>th</sup> October, the hurdler Enriqueta Basilio lit the fire on a huge copper plate made in accordance with Aztec motives. Ninety thousand people and 112 delegations attended the opening ceremony at the Estadio Olímpico. The sports feast was inaugurated by the Mexican President Gustavo Díaz Ordaz and the IOC President Avery Brundage. The opening ceremony was already a little satisfaction for Czechoslovakia. During the entrance of the Czechoslovak team the spectators began to act in a surprising way: they were standing up, clapping their hands and chanting “Checo, Checo, ra, ra, ra”, which was a manifestation of sympathy with the occupied country. This “disturbance” of the ceremony was noticed by the world press, and they stated that Czechoslovakia won the Olympic opening (Popper et al., 1969). Věra Čáslavská remarked that the opening ceremony provided the Czechoslovak team with courage and a will to win (Hašek, 2010).

### **The Greatest Star of Czechoslovakia as well as of the entire Olympic Games**

The Czechoslovak team with 122 sportsmen from 13 disciplines set off to Mexico led by the chairman of the board of ČSTV and ČSOV, Emanuel Bosák. The brightest star of the team was the gymnast Věra Čáslavská. After three gold medals from the Olympic Games in Tokyo and regular victories on European and World Championships she left for Mexico as one of the favorites with a prospect for a medal harvest. Between 1964 and 1968 she was undefeated in the all-around in major international events. She was on the top of her career and at the same time close to its end. She was to become the most successful female participant in the Games and a symbol of the entire women’s Olympic sport. Before the Mexican Olympic Games she took part in 1966 in the pre-Olympic games in Ciudad de México. Their purpose was to restore her damaged self-confidence after an unsuccessful WCH in Dortmund the same year.<sup>3</sup> Right after the championship Čáslavská didn’t feel

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<sup>3</sup> She was leaving nervous after a recent elbow injury and after media statements of Natasha Kuchinskaya, who became an absolute champion of the USSR in 1965, when she was only 15. Through the newspaper she was challenging Čáslavská to a first big duel and she was quite self-confident. Despite of her indisputable qualities, Kuchinskaya didn’t carry out a good performance, but anyway she got high score. Inconsistencies in

like going to Mexico for a pre-Olympic test – she knew she would either get back her reputation or her psychological situation would get even worse. Finally she decided to participate, especially because of her psyche. The Mexican press was focused on her duel with Natasha Kuchinskaya, who had been there for the second time and was quite popular. But eventually the popularity moved to the Czechoslovak gymnast thanks to her five victories: in all-round, uneven bars, balance beam, vault and floor. Local newspaper *La Prensa* proclaimed her a “queen that dominated the crowd and in addition to medals she also stole their hearts” Čáslavská-Odložilová (1972, p. 123). Here is where mutual affection has been born between the Olympic country and the winner nicknamed “campeónísima Vera” (Věra, the greatest champion, author’s note). Čáslavská judged these pre-Olympic Games as a victory over herself.

The following year the European Championship was held in Amsterdam. Dramatic duel with Kuchinskaya was repeated as a first championship after Dortmund. Before there were people, including her ex-trainer Vladimír Prorok, telling her to take a year off in order to be more fresh and attractive for the audience as well as for the referees. Three months before the championship the Czechoslovak gymnast decided to participate; she introduced new elements, remade all her choreographies and intentionally made her training conditions more difficult.<sup>4</sup> In Amsterdam she was supposed to defend her first absolute European victory from Sofia in 1965. Notwithstanding the success on the Mexican pre-Olympic Games, the Dutch newspapers were proclaiming that Čáslavská is frightened. Maybe it was the Medias’ attention which were underestimating her or Kuchinskaya’s self-confidence that provoked a huge determination of the Czechoslovak gymnast. She made the best of it when she spoiled the very first discipline of all-round, uneven bars, but still was able to get over it and defend her all-round gold medal from Bulgaria. This experience and nerve would become very helpful in Mexico.

After the arrival to the Olympic Games site the main topic was again the duel with Kuchinskaya. She arrived to Mexico a couple of weeks in advance, at the time, when Čáslavská – after the occupation – was training without gymnastic equipment near to Šumperk and shuffling piles of carbon in order to preserve her calluses (Hašek, 2010). Her Soviet rival had been training hard, including many elements that until that time “belonged” only to Čáslavská. During these weeks the Mexicans were focused only on the Soviet gymnast; however “la Vera” stole all her popularity just after her arrival to Ciudad de México on 12<sup>th</sup> October.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, Čáslavská herself admitted that the audience was very fair and that they appreciated the qualities of both gymnasts, whose popularity was comparable. The people attended their public trainings in the Auditorio Nacional and both gymnasts fought toughly for their affection, because it might be the last bit needed to win. Čáslavská didn’t forget about the choice of music and its influence on the audience’s sympathy; her Mexican Rhapsody bewitched them already during the

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decision making were not rare and the audience showed their discontent quite loudly. Čáslavská won the title in vault and in individual as well as team all-round, which broke the USSR hegemony after 14 years! Nevertheless, Kuchinskaya won unjustly the uneven bars as well as the balance beam and floor despite of the protests of the Czech trainer Slávka Matlochová (Čáslavská-Odložilová, 1972).

<sup>4</sup> She trained on old tools; she attached weights around her waist or she let the trainer to distract her during the exercise.

<sup>5</sup> When Čáslavská arrived, there was such an upheaval at the airport that the team management started to be worried about the chance to ensure some peace for the famous gymnast (*Československý sport*, 1968).

trainings. However, the Czechoslovak gymnast was affected by high altitude above sea level. With such a short acclimatization she hasn't been able to finish her floor choreography at the beginning. Nevertheless, as the Olympic competition was coming closer Čáslavská's performance was reaching the level of other events held in normal altitude above sea level.

On Monday 21<sup>st</sup> October the gymnastics competition started as well as the most expected duel – the one of Čáslavská against Kuchinskaya and the other one of the Czechoslovak team against the Soviet one. Both outstanding gymnasts could count on the same popularity from the 17,000 people in audience of the Auditorio Nacional, but when a direct face-off took place, the chanting “Vera, Vera, ra, ra, ra” already prevailed. Especially the Mexican Rhapsody based upon Mexican popular songs for the floor exercises completely charmed the spectators. The opinion of the audience affected also the referees' evaluation. After free program on balance beam in the team competition, the audience was so unsatisfied with the score that they made it increase in 0.2 points. A similar situation took place during the final program on balance beam in individual competition. Čáslavská herself admitted that “the balance beam was such a dramatic competition, which began already in the warm-up area, when we learned that Milena Duchková has won a gold medal” *Československý sport* (1968, p. 3). *Campeonísima* presented a great program despite of this drama, however the referees awarded Kuchinskaya with the victory – apart from the fact that the audience heavily protested. But in the individual competition, the 23<sup>rd</sup> October was a day of victory. Čáslavská won the gold medal she always wanted – from the Olympic octathlon.<sup>6</sup> The great achievement of the Czechoslovak gymnast was emphasized also by the fact that her main rival from the USSR fell from uneven bars. “La Vera Grandiosa” got her last gold medals two days later. As a winner of four disciplines (individual all-round, vault, uneven bars and floor) and a double silver medalist (all-round teams, balance beam) she became the most successful participant of the Mexican Olympic Games and the most successful Czechoslovak Olympic sportsman ever. The world press noticed a small Čáslavská's gesture when the results of floor were being announced, where she shared the first place with the Soviet Larisa Petrik. During the Soviet national anthem she turned her head down and away and stared at the floor. “I couldn't turn my back to the flags, although one of them belonged to the occupants – that wouldn't be dignified. So I ostentatiously kept my eyes on the floor, and that was enough. The whole world understood it. The West made a sensation out of it, but they didn't have the slightest notion of how complicated they made it for me with the Czechoslovak authorities” Hašek (2010, p. 5). The Mexican Games meant a beautiful point to a successful eleven years long career of Věra Čáslavská<sup>7</sup>. The joy of the Czechoslovak team was spoiled by Soviets only in team all-

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<sup>6</sup> All the Mexican TV channels dedicated half of the news time of that day to the Czechoslovak – Soviet duel in which Čáslavská defended the title of the absolute winner from Tokyo by an admirable performance (*Československý sport*, 1968).

<sup>7</sup> Čáslavská was declared the best world athlete of the year 1968. But problems started in her country. In June 1968 she signed a petition called Two thousand words against Soviet pressure against Czechoslovak reforms. She supported social and economic changes prepared during the revival process known as the Prague Spring. Because of it she was then excluded from the Czechoslovak sport organization. Despite of it Čáslavská graduated from Faculty of Physical Education and Sport of Charles University in Prague and since 1974 she has been working as a gymnastic trainer.

round where they struggled hard and took the gold medal away from the Czechoslovak team, which made it easier for them making a couple of small mistakes. After the Games, Natasha Kuchinskaya also finished her career. She suffered from a thyroid disorder as well as from a loss of motivation.

### **Two Girls from Prague, Two Destinies**

Among Czechoslovak sportsmen there were two very young girls – only a sixteen year old Milena Duchková, diver, and a two years older Miloslava Rezková, high jumper. They were both from the occupied Prague. Their common trait was their youth, associated with a lack of experience but also with a mind freed of too much responsibility. They both said it was an advantage for their perception of the Olympic competition: they didn't get nervous and managed to advance towards a successful ending. However, the sports situation before the Games was quite different for each of them.

Milena Duchková, a twelve time Czechoslovak champion, wasn't first admitted to the sports club. In 1960, when Milena's mother took her to Tyršův dům, the trainer Marie Čermáková refused them saying they don't admit such small children (Macek, 2008). But when they explained her that the girl is eight and that she only looks like she's five, she agreed. Milena later convinced her trainer by how hard she worked and by her will to fight. On the diving tower she looked like a doll with her only 157 cm and 52 kilos. According to her own words, Milena Duchková "won everything before the Olympic Games". She wasn't exaggerating. She won 11 big events before the Olympic Games, including the European Cup in Helsinki in 1968, and she defeated all her rivals except the Americans. She admitted that she "doesn't know much about the Americans and other overseas rivals by now, but she is very curious and looking forward to the Olympic competition" *Československý sport* (1968, p. 1). Thanks to her results she was one of the hottest candidates for the victory and the pressure on such a young diver was enormous. The first competition in Mexico didn't work out well for her; she ended up 10<sup>th</sup> in springboard diving. Nevertheless, it didn't break her determination. She told her trainer that she "will show them all how to step up on the medal podium" Pacina (1968, p. 7). Although according to Marie Čermáková, Milena knew very well why and what she is fighting for, the trainer couldn't believe the calm and self-confidence of the young competitor. She was afraid of the pressure, because it became even stronger. If she didn't succeed in the second competition, it would be a real disappointment and the authorities would give a negative evaluation.

The following competition of the Czechoslovak competitor, platform diving, was very dramatic and very tight. It was intensified by the fact that the other rival who fought with Duchková for the victory came from the Soviet Union. After the first day, the Czech was leading with only 0.1 point in ahead of Natalya Lobanova. She made her début on the Olympic Games in Tokyo and, also very young, took the 7<sup>th</sup> position in Japan. In Mexico the Soviet took the lead on the second day of the competition. The fact that affected the overall results was a difficult dive that Duchková introduced into her free program – one and a half somersaults with double twist. It is interesting to mention that in spring of that year she broke her clavicle when she was performing this dive. The fact that she introduced a dive which was associated with a bad memory shows her courage and her



capability to put everything into it. The dive was performed in a perfect way and she took the lead before the last series. Milena was absolutely calm in the seventh series; she again chose a harder dive than her rivals and again performed it perfectly (*Československý sport*, 1968). The high complexity of the jumps and their perfect performance brought her a final difference of less than 3 points. This young Czechoslovak competitor defeated the Soviet rival on 23<sup>rd</sup> October 1968 and until today she is the only Czechoslovak or Czech Olympic winner in aquatic disciplines. The contemporary press called her a “treasury of confidence: she went through the competition as the most stable diver of all” Pacina (1968, p. 7)<sup>8</sup>.

The position of the other young competitor from Czechoslovakia, Miloslava Rezková, was very different. The 18 years old representative in high jump started to do athletics when she was in the 7<sup>th</sup> grade of elementary school, i.e. only four years before the Mexican Games. She passed through ballet and rhythmic gymnastics; she also played volleyball for Lokomotiva Čechie. In athletics she dedicated herself to a wide range of disciplines as well – she did hurdles and shot put. She got to high jump almost by mistake – for the first time she participated in a competition as an alternate in the youth team of Rudá hvězda and she won with 133 cm. She was watching the Olympic Games in Tokyo in 1964 with her father, who mentioned how nice it would be, if in four years time he could be watching his own daughter on a top event... His wish nearly didn't come true. Rezková was beginning the year 1968 with 166 cm as her personal best and she wasn't in the preliminary nomination for Mexico. She was nominated on the last possible day. Just before the National Championship Rezková agreed with R. Hübner, her trainer and partner in one person, on a radical change – to shorten the approach from eight to five strides and put all her force into the take-off (*Československý sport*, 1968). Five days later, on the 28<sup>th</sup> of July on the National Championship in Jablonec nad Nisou she defeated Mária Faithová as well as Jaroslava Valentová, who were both already nominated, and with a new national record of 182 cm she nominated herself for the Olympic Games. The athlete herself remarks that she didn't even realize the importance of the Olympic competition, her first representation event (Schimon, 2008). It was just a competition like any other. “Maybe the only difference was that instead of the girls I knew from our stadiums I saw mostly strange faces of competitors with which I had to compete for the first time. And which I wished to beat so much, at least some of them...” Popper (1969, p. 34).

Rezková was, in comparison to Milena Duchková, in a different situation – the favourite of the competition was someone else, Rita Schmidt. This young competitor of the occupant country, the German Democratic Republic alias the “Eastern Germany” was about to celebrate her 18<sup>th</sup> birthday on the Olympic Games. Since the beginning of the year she hasn't been defeated on a single international event. That's one of the reasons Rezková didn't have to be so nervous. But in the qualifying round it wasn't very apparent. All the Czechoslovak competitors had to repeat their attempts. The pressure on Miloslava consisted in something else – there were people in Czechoslovakia asking whether a nomination of such a young competitor with no experience hasn't been a mistake. And

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<sup>8</sup> On the following Olympic Games in Munich Duchková won the silver medal in platform diving, but on the OG in Montreal 1976 she was 22<sup>nd</sup> and she finished the career. In the same time she graduated from dentistry at Charles University in Prague and she emigrated shortly after that to Canada.

she tried to prove that it has not. For the final on 17<sup>th</sup> October qualified Rita Schmidt as well as all three Czechoslovak competitors. The head trainer Jaroslav Kovář trusted especially in Jaroslava Valentová but: “Milena is perfect when she gets into a nervous trance. Technically she is the best. She’s a young girl with no psychic constrictions” Pacina (1968, p. 8). The final duel was indeed the most equal in the history of women’s high jump. In addition, the quality rose surprisingly – on the European Championship in 1966, 174cm were enough for a medal! In Mexico the medals were given for different performances. Rezková was reassured by the feeling that those who didn’t believe in her must be at least satisfied with the fact that she slipped through into the final. The shortest of the competitors even read a book, *Three Men in a Boat*, during the final, in order not to watch her rivals and not to get nervous. However, finally she had to raise her head and see how is she standing. Three jumpers got equally over 180cm in the final: Miloslava Rezková and two Soviets, Antonina Okorokova and Valentina Kozyr. These three now had to jump for medals. The bar rose 2 cm and Rezková knew she must do her best. The Soviet rivals mustn’t win. “I said to myself that I’d get over the bar even if I had to tear my leg off,” remembers the athlete, Schimon (2008, p. 8). Her rivals from the occupant country stirred her up so much that she was the only one, who was able to overcome this height at 16:53 and to shock the entire athletic world. On the highest bar Rezková proved to have nerves of steel, because at the same time there were world record attempts on triple jump and forty thousand spectators were going crazy.<sup>9</sup> What a difference in comparison to a thousand fans in Jablonec... During the medal ceremony the tribunes were chanting Checo! Checo! Rezková won their hearts by holding back her emotion on her way onto the medal podium and by a river of tears during the sound of the national anthem (*Československý spot*, 1968). The Olympic competition in high jump was followed by an afterpiece on the medal podium. When Miroslava Rezková took over the golden medal from the hands of the Czechoslovak member of IOC František Kroutil, the second Okorokova and third Kozyr didn’t shake hands with her. The winner didn’t let herself disconcert: “Why should I hand out my hand first? They should have come first. Normally I would do it, but not this time” Schimon (2008, p. 8)<sup>10</sup>.

## Duels above the Net

Other dramatic duels against the Soviet rival on Mexican ground were going on in the halls of Gimnasio and Cancha. Czechoslovakia was represented by a volleyball team of the current world champions. Their performance among ten teams can be evaluated as successful and failed at the same time. After the sensational victory of USA over USSR there were many thousands of visitors in the huge Gimnasio. Many spectators were crowded also at the more modest hall called shortly Cancha. The audience witnessed a thrilling tournament, where until the very end – the match of Czechoslovaks against the Soviets – the winner was unsure. The representatives of Czechoslovakia showed their will

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<sup>9</sup> On 17/10/1968, men’s triple jump World Record was set four times in total. First by the Italian G. Gentile who jumped 17.22 m, the Soviet V. Saneyev added a centimetre, the Brazilian N. Prudencio jumped 17.27. The final value of the record was set by the Soviet competitor Viktor Saneyev to 17.39 m.

<sup>10</sup> A year after Rezková won ECH in Athens. The following years were less successful for her and since 1977 she has been working as a trainer.



in dramatic victorious five-set games against the “Eastern Germany”, Japan, Brazil, Bulgaria; they defeated USA, Belgium and the domestic Mexico as well. Nevertheless, observers described the Czechoslovak team as one with greatest psychic instability (Červinka & Pacina, 1968). In every match the Czechoslovak volleyball players alternated great moments with intervals of total helplessness. However, they lost only their penultimate match with Poland 1:3. The Czechoslovaks started the match under pressure; they were conscious of that the Polish played most of their matches at Cancha, where they were doing well, and they got scared of the rival’s power (Popper, 1969). They lost two sets very quickly, and even though they modified the score to 1:2, it was the last sign of resistance. This result shook up the tournament table a lot and Czechoslovakia could have ended up as fourth instead of winning a gold medal.<sup>11</sup> The loss with Polish, caused above all by a worse mental condition, set the basis of an unsuccessful final match against the Soviet Union. The final took only about an hour and the Czechoslovak’s performance – in other matches encouraged heavily by the audience – didn’t indicate that the USSR was fighting against the world champions. The spectators were disappointed by the game, they didn’t continue encouraging the teams and when the count of the third set was 1:6, they started to leave the stadium (*Československý sport*, 1968). The loss was crushing. This last match left an unfavourable impression of the Czechoslovak actuation on the whole tournament, but it wouldn’t be fair to understand the bronze Olympic medal as a clear failure. The performance of the Czechoslovak volleyball team was again evaluated in an analysis made by the ČSOV in 1969. It stated that the team didn’t cope with the mental pressure brought by the occupation, where the contact with and behaviour to the countries of the socialist block were strictly planned. The analysis mentions that the issue of greetings before and after the matches became an undesirable dominating feature of our tournament participation.<sup>12</sup> The energy invested in resolving the procedural issues should have been invested rather into the quality and intensity of training and concentration during matches.

### **Czechoslovakia successful not only against the Soviets**

Not all of the dramatic duels on the Olympic Games were against the rivals from the Soviet Union. On Saturday 19<sup>th</sup> October the one who won a gold medal on a shooting range at Campo Militar, not far from the Olympic village, was a former boxer Jan Kůrka. This soldier from Pilsen was in a good form but he was also stroked by a huge nervousness in Mexico. “It took fifteen minutes before my knees stopped shaking” Žehanová (2008, p. 9). Explains the shooter his mental condition just after the competition, after which he has been so exhausted, that he even fell unconscious for a while. He knew that with 597 points, about which he felt sure, he could be sixth in the worst case. And that maybe he has one point more, which would mean a chance of getting a medal. This uncertainty took

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<sup>11</sup> Victory of GDR over Poland finally meant that the Czechoslovak team will not return without a medal.

<sup>12</sup> After negotiations at the Central Committee of the Communist Party there were adopted principles of behaviour of Czechoslovak participants at the Olympics. All appearances of our delegates were supposed to be in accordance to the opinions and politics of state and party organs. This analysis further states that “after many consultations it has been established by the management of Czechoslovak team that the behaviour towards other teams of the socialist countries’ bloc would be correct and formally polite” (Kössl, 1999).

an hour and a half, because after the competition every target had to be secured with a seal and evaluated by six referees. During his shooting from the 50 meter rifle prone, in 60 shots he got 598 points and equated the Olympic as well as the world record. The Hungarian László Hammerl got the same number of points and for a while he was even announced by the organizers as the winner. Nevertheless, it was revealed that one of his last nines was shot in the last round.<sup>13</sup> Winning over the Hungarian, native of another country which invaded Czechoslovakia in August, meant historically the first gold medal from a shooting competition for our country. It was quite a surprise, because until then, Kůrka's best result had been the sixth place on the European Championship in 1965 in the free rifle, standing position. The excitement from winning the gold medal was such that in the other competitions Kůrka didn't catch up with the world's elite.

In men's athletics the only one who succeeded was European discus champion Ludvík Daněk. After the return of his back pain, some illnesses and a decline of form, he set off to Mexico as the world's fifth discus thrower and quite psychologically unstable. After years of success he has been loosing even with European rivals and he was sad "to be known as a competitor unable to fight on a major event" (*Československý sport*, 1968, p. 3). The Olympic competition didn't evolve very well, a Mexican downpour took place and the competition had to be interrupted. After two attempts was Daněk only fifth. Then came a unique attempt of Al Oerter. It brought the other throwers down, but it poured life into Daněk's veins. As he said, he became really angry after Oerter's attempt and he made the best of it throwing 62.92 m, his season's best. It brought him a bronze medal and, at the same time, the first for Czechoslovakia in Mexico. Unfortunately he stayed 16 cm behind the silver Eastern German athlete Lothar Mild. Daněk commented on his standings: "On one hand, I'm very happy, because I have never fought in such an equal competition. On the other hand, I'm also a bit sad, because I feel I could have thrown further" (*Československý sport*, 1968, p. 3). The next medal positions were added by Czechoslovak competitors on the wrestling mattress. Third places were won in Greco-Roman wrestling by Miroslav Zeman in flyweight and by Petr Kment in heavyweight. Also the swimming stadium Alberca68 brought joy to the Czechoslovak colours, although these accomplishments didn't bring any medals. The participation of Olga Kozičová in the final of 200m free style was a great success. She was the first Czechoslovak competitor to be in the final round of a swimming discipline after 16 years.

### **A less successful Participation**

After the return from Mexico, the Czechoslovak team was welcomed by the president Ludvík Svoboda on the Prague Castle on 31<sup>st</sup> October 1968. Svoboda claimed in his welcome speech that the Czechoslovak national competitors "honestly fulfilled their promise and the task, with which their socialistic country entrusted them. They defended our colours well" Popper (1969, p. 4). Nevertheless, there were people saying that "if it hasn't been for Čáslavská, the Games wouldn't have been such a success..." Popper (1969, p. 138). Far from expectations was the performance of Czechoslovak footballers. Controversy concerning the issue of non-professional players projected into the

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<sup>13</sup> In case of equality of points, the decisive is the last round.

uncertainty, whether the most popular team sport even belongs in the Olympic Games. Notwithstanding, football was present on the Mexican Games and there was a great interest for it.<sup>14</sup> The final tips before the tournament were clear: the local team will play against Czechoslovakia, which would previously defeat the USSR. But these predictions proved to be completely false. The Czechoslovak team slumped out of the tournament already after the matches in group, where it ended up third after the loss with Guatemala, draw with Bulgaria and only one victory, although crowned with a goal show, over Thailand. Similarly, the Mexicans failed in the struggle for the third place against Japan. The Czechoslovak strong men also ranked among the defeated individuals. Before setting off to Mexico there existed predictions that the weight lifters could bring medals or at least stand among the first six. Beating the records was also planned. However, these ambitious dreams ended up as only one point for the sixth place of Hans Zdražila in the weight up to 82.5 kg. Another disappointment consisted in boxing, traditional Czechoslovak postwar pride. Only Jan Hejduk made it to the quarterfinal. He had a free lot in the first round and in the second he defeated Freitas from Uruguay. In the following round he was defeated by the domestic Zaragoza and put an end to the participation of the whole boxing team on these Games.

Czechoslovakia didn't even succeed on the Xochimilco Channel<sup>15</sup>, which was rightly called the Olympic galleys. For the rowers and watermen the lack of oxygen was fundamental, but it is fair to say that the conditions were equal for everybody. Many crews collapsed after reaching the finish due to a brutal oxygen debt and oxygen masks had to bring them back to consciousness. The only race, where a Czechoslovak boat fought its way to the final, was the eight-oared shell competition. By the way, the one that was the least promising. The Czechoslovaks ended up fifth. Especially the pair oar with coxswain Miluška – Kolesa (Kovář) was setting off with great expectations. The previous year they placed second on the pre-Olympic competition. Disappointment and stop sign came already in the heat. The last hope for a good result was Václav Kozák, basically a veteran of the rowing lanes. He was third in the small final, i.e. finally on the ninth place. We ranked among countries, which were hardly capable of repeating the medal gains from Tokyo. The canoeists were doing a little better, but their performance in Mexico cannot be considered as a great success. Although the promise given before the Games by Bohumil Kudrna, the trainer, that there are going to be four boats in the final (which many experts openly mistrusted) has been fulfilled. However, the last canoeist medal of Josef Holeček from Helsinki has not been replaced by a new one. The closest one to get it was the canoeist Jiří Čvrtečka on a kilometre track. Nevertheless, he missed the bronze by only 0.32 s. From the finish he was taken by a motor boat: he fell unconscious because of total exhaustion. On the same track the kayaker Václav Mára was sixth, which meant at least some points for the final standings. The only Czechoslovak woman in Xochimilco, kayaker Ivana Vávrová, made a good result as well; she was fifth on the half kilometre track. Only the canoe double Rudolf Pěnkava – Svatopluk Skarupský didn't gain points on a kilometre track, they were unluckily disqualified for crossing the lane.

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<sup>14</sup> Total of 32 matches were seen by more than half a million spectators, which contributed significantly to balance the financial situation of the Olympics (Popper, 1969).

<sup>15</sup> In times of the Olympic Games, Xochimilco was basically a rural area on the periphery of Mexico City; today it is a piece of greenery nearly in its centre.

The presence of the Czechoslovak team in Mexico has also been accompanied by successful attempts to emigrate and stay in the host country. So in the course of the Olympic Games the team was left by the gymnastic married couple Kubičkovi and by the sculler Petr Krátký. The team management or later the ČSTV didn't comment on these matters anyway, or at least there are no credible records of it.

## CONCLUSION

Before the XIX Olympic Games in 1968 Czechoslovakia as well as Mexico were going through great interior problems. Similarly, many other places in the world were affected by tension or military conflicts. These facts didn't influence the course of the Olympic Games in Mexico. What they did influence was the performance of Czechoslovak sportsmen there. After the August invasion of the Warsaw Pact troops, there were presented various protests to the International Olympic Committee against the participation of the countries, which took part in this operation. Despite of these protests, the aggressors were present on the Games. As well as the occupied country, that was deliberating about the possibility of not going to the Olympics as a protest against the occupation. The Czechoslovak Olympic team finally set off to Mexico with the aim to do their best to represent the attacked country. This aim has been fulfilled: the Czechoslovaks gained unusual sympathy of the local audience, which showed above all during the opening ceremony of the Games and then during the gymnastic duels of Věra Čáslavská and Natasha Kuchinskaya. Also other sportsmen were increasingly motivated in rivalry with the Soviets – this brought gold medal to Miloslava Rezková in high jump. On the contrary, this additional motivation was tying the hands of the volleyball team and in the final they lost easily with the Soviet rivals.

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## ČESKOSLOVENSKO NA XIX. OH V SOUBOJÍCH SE SOVĚTSKÝMI SOUPEŘI

KRISTINA JAKUBCOVÁ

### SOUHRN

Politicko-bezpečnostní situace před XIX. olympijskými hrami v Ciudad de México byla komplikovaná. Mnoho zemí hrozilo bojkotem her kvůli plánované účasti apartheidní Jihoafrické republiky. S politickými nepokoji se potýkala pořadatelská země, mnohé světové regiony i Československo. Na průběh samotných her však tyto události vliv neměly. Ovlivnily účinkování československých sportovců. Po srpnové invazi vojsk tzv. Varšavské smlouvy se agresori přes mnohé protesty her zúčastnili. Stejně tak československá výprava po kratším zvažování situace nakonec do Mexika odcestovala s cílem napadenou zemi co nejlépe reprezentovat. Čechoslováci si jako okupovaná země získali nebyvalé sympatie domácího publika již při slavnostním zahájení her. Boje se Sověty, reprezentujícími v očích světa i Českoslováků okupantské státy, byly mnohdy dosti

vyhrocené. Vítězně z nich vyšla gymnastka Věra Čáslavská či atletka Miloslava Rezková. Naopak pro družstvo volejbalistů byla přídatná motivace ve formě pomsty okupantům svazující a ve finále sovětským soupeřům hladce podleli.

**Klíčová slova:** politická situace, válečné konflikty, Mexico, Sovětský svaz

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