



Book about Leon Štukelj unknown life. Written by Ivan Čuk, Alenka Puhar and Aleks Leo Vest. Reviewed by dr. Lovro Šturm, ddr. Igor Grdina and Franček Jauk, prof reading by Borut Trekman, translation by Metka Čuk and designed by Klemen Kunaver. Published by Faculty of Sport, University of Ljubljana in december 2019.

## PARTS FROM SUMMARY

While working on book *Prevarani sokoli*, we searched for anything that included the key word 'Sokol' and was available in Slovenian public archives. When we visited the Pokrajinski arhiv in Maribor where we researched documents relating to Sokol Matica, Leon Štukelj's documentation did not come up since, amazingly, it does not include »Sokol« key word. When we gifted book *Prevarani sokoli* to Leon's daughter Lidija and asked her if we could get access to his archived documentation, she told us that all his documentation was already in the Pokrajinski muzej. Her encouragement and our research of the documentation showed that it was well worth collecting, organising and publishing it. Another lucky circumstance was that we got access to the documentation loaned to the Dolenjski muzej by Lidija Štukelj's family where we found a gray booklet.

Leon Štukelj's life ended in 1999. It has taken twenty years since his passing that we can finally make known what was on his mind but he never dared to canvas publicly. What prevented Leon Štukelj from publicly speaking about certain memories, we do not now, he never made any notes on this. He did, however, wrote on the front page of his gray booklet:

May these notes serve as a memory of her father to my daughter Lidija. They might also be used by a chronicler who wants to highlight the period that I experienced; finally, this is also my last will and desire.

This short yet important message made us think of fulfilling Leon Štukelj's last will and desire.

Leon Štukelj, a Slovenian intellectual, humanitarian, cosmopolite, top gymnast and athlete describes in his secret memoirs those experiences that were obviously not acceptable for publishing in the Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia or that he himself didn't dare to publish even in the Republic of Slovenia.

His first book, *Mojih sedem svetovnih tekmovanj* (My Seven World Competitions), ends with the beginning of WWII. The book is very extensive and represents a true encyclopedia of gymnastics between the two wars. It debunked a few myths that sometimes still persist in our journalistic circles, such as that Nadia Comaneci was the first person to ever receive straight ten in gymnastics. His second book drafted in cooperation with Franček Jauk, *Prvih sto let* (My First One Hundred Years), in many respects repeats the pre-war story and partly attempts to explain what happened during and after the war by presenting Štukelj's thoughts on different issues as they emerged in conversation between him and his co-author. Leon Štukelj seemed to have some trouble explaining certain views which became clear in the Franček Jauk's film *Leon Štukelj in njegovo stoletje* (Leon Štukelj and His Century). When he is asked what he thinks about that dark period in Tito's Yugoslavia, he freezes for a moment, looks frightened and is at loss for words, then says that he doesn't know how come this dark period occurred.

Leon Štukelj's life path is immersed in gymnastics but this is not the only field of his activities. He has often been pictured as a gymnast, an Olympian, but rarely as a lawyer or a family man,

even though events and resources show that his family meant to him the most and he deeply cared for and about it.

Contact with the gym was the turning point in Leon Štukelj's life. Here he found his greatest pleasure and satisfaction. It gave him strong muscles and health, taught him to be a proud Slovenian and Yugoslav, connected him with the working people, with the people from the bottom and the middle, and provided him with the sense of understanding of his own situation at the time. According to Maslow (1976), we could say that before WWII, he reached the point of self-realisation. We could say that through his family, gymnastics and his judge job he went through all levels, but gymnastics and his judge job gave him that final points of respect and self-realisation.

Of course, hard work and successful conclusion of many cases eventually led to promotions and higher pay brackets. His memoirs show that in the judicial circles, freedom of speech applied, but he never expected that this freedom of speech would eventually be used against him. There was freedom of speech in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia and suppression of expressing one's thoughts in the Democratic Federative Yugoslavia. Not every country that calls itself democratic is really democratic.

Even though the court exonerated him of charges that he collaborated with the occupying forces, due to the ideological reform in the judiciary he was no longer suitable to serve as a judge and had to find another way. His court proceedings are an excellent document that shows how ideology overrode any evidence. Legal knowledge of prosecutors and judges (butchers, farmers, etc., could serve as judges) was obviously extremely modest, they served the new government as a tool to cleanse and bully their opponents. Leon Štukelj had to thank his friends in Maribor to offer him jobs and enable him to still work as a lawyer in different chambers. Here, he continued his excellent legal work, even though hidden behind party members. Nevertheless, these documents indicate that he enjoyed legal work and that he was well regarded by his co-workers and his superiors. In his post-war legal work, his humanitarian views still came to the fore which is obvious from the cases relating to housing in his company. Due to "socialist, labourer-friendly" legislation, he worked to the age of 67 which is more than is required even according to our legislation today. At the time of his retirement, his employment record shows that he had worked for 42 years, 11 months and 25 days – this too is more than is required by our current standards. As a matter of interest, Leon states in his book *Prvih 100 let*, on p. 173, that he had worked for 44 years, 7 months and 13 days. It is not clear, though, which period didn't count to his total number of years of service.

In the part that was not sent off, a few other important Leon's thoughts: "When you approached me (i.e., after the funeral of Dr Viktor Murnik in the office of Bojan Polak Stjenka) and I told you my surname, you shuddered with words "a, Štukelj!", as it happens when we meet someone we know very well by name but have never met the person before. By that, did you mean Štukelj the gymnast or Štukelj the prisoner?... I approved of the fight against the occupying forces but not the goal the Party had. Therefore, I reduced myself to an observer rather than participant on either side. But for the Party this was still not enough. It was politically naïve of

the Party to allow the proceedings against me to take place, this was not an honourable thing to do.”

Leon Štukelj's respect for the father of the Slovenian sport, Dr Viktor Murnik, is extraordinary: he sees him as the single person who stood behind Sokol members' successes in major competitions. When it came to awards, the Communist Party was keen not to talk about importance of the Sokol movement for the Slovenian nation and the development of sport, therefore they named the highest Slovenian award after Stanko Bloudek whose impact on the Slovenian nation and the development of sport in Slovenia is not even remotely comparable to Dr Viktor Murnik's. When Bloudek awards were bestowed for the first time in 1965, there were eleven recipients, among them Miroslav Cerar, Jelica Vazzaz and Sports Association Partizan Železničar in the gymnastics discipline. Among the award winners was also Rudolf Cvetko for his life achievements in fencing; in the explanation, his Olympic medals from 1912 and 1915 and his 15 years of being the president of the Fencing Association of Slovenia and Yugoslavia were mentioned. Leon Štukelj's achievements were forgotten whereas his court proceedings were not, and the Sokol idea was also dead. In 1997, sports authorities finally remembered Leon, after he had experienced the peak of his fame when he appeared in the Olympics in Atlanta in 1996 where he came to the stage with a spring in his step. Finally, there was a thought that he might be worthy of the most prestigious award in Slovenia, regardless of the fact that the International Olympic Committee awarded and recognised him as early as in 1987. In 1991, this honour among individual members of the Slovenian Olympic Committee was bestowed on Miroslav Cerar as the only other person.

But we are fortunate enough that Leon wrote down his thoughts about ideology and wanted them to be published. He encountered communism for the first time at the end of World War I when captured soldiers of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy returned from their captivity in Russia. The new political idea echoed and was discussed everywhere. Leon Štukelj writes: “without any knowledge of scientific Marxism, we evaluated communism from our common sense position. Of course, most people who came from poor families favourably viewed the propaganda for better life since the idea is basically humanitarian. However, communism also injected in people who were used to living in unity and had mutual respect and respect of property the sense of envy and a demand for equality. Sharp discussions among Dolenjska students were carried on without any understanding of how and why the existing situation evolved, the important thing was only to destroy the old because it was unjust. Thanks to those who opposed destruction (for no matter what reason) and to Leon, who always tended to philosophise and analyse, all arguments ”for” and “against” in long debates after exercise finally crystallised and the majority came to believe that revolution was not the only way out of this situation, or rather that revolution was a too risky cost for what was promised to us in a few carefully selected words. An important question emerged: can people still remain members of the Sokol club or Sokol in general if they support revolution that was supposed to bring down social differences that existed on the micro scale among Sokol members?” Leon continues: “Our upbringing, in and outside Sokol, truly did not ignite the passion for revolution in us. There was too much idealism and romanticism in our “social opponents” among Sokol members and not enough gaping differences to suffice for a sudden turn from “brotherhood” to “revolution”.

Everyone was in a situation where study and hard work could help them achieve good livelihood, with every option open to reach better and even the best positions. Social differences were actually negligible. The richest town's people had a trade and perhaps their own house, among public servants the best off were those in academic professions. These people of course lived well, from our perspective perhaps even luxurious. Luxurious because we didn't have more than just bare essentials. True, some didn't have even that and were struggling. Yet nobody was without a chance to get out of this situation by studying and working hard and reach a satisfactory or even luxury life of those who were best off. There was nothing like the capitalism we read about in brochures (Kautsky), hence there was no awareness of the "class enemy", there was no real division among us and therefore no such sharp contrast that would ignite hatred in us. All these facts, recognised on the rational and emotional level, showed us, and me in particular, that there was no need for a violent removal of these differences that would require revolutionary acts including, as a necessary consequence, leaving the Sokol organisation. The Sokol organisation was the most democratic of them all. The whole nation was in danger, not just one class, therefore Tyrš in Fugner rejected class conflict as a danger that could weaken the nation in its defence, and promoted the national question as the most important issue instead. There was too much idealism, romanticism and cultural refinement in me to turn overnight from a friend to a foe. If I followed the gospel spread by communists, I would have to become a class enemy and immediately leave Sokol. In my view, there was no objective necessity for this step, since we lived in modest but very orderly circumstances at home. After many discussions and debates, my view was agreed upon by many gymnasts in my inner circle of friends. We all thought that the achievement of national freedom, experienced by us so emotionally, was more that we could ever imagine to have.

The following memory cannot be considered a secret one as Leon Štukelj published it in his book *Prvih 100 let*, nevertheless, it is worth quoting (p. 184): "I did not hold it against the communists, there were ordinary people who were offered dreams and future that was actually not achievable. But I hold it against our former intellectuals that were my company at the time... Intelligent people should have known what was happening in the Soviet Union, that people were imprisoned and killed in large numbers there. People knew, but they overlooked it and still led our masses against the same social goals in a similar way."

Book *Prevarani sokoli* highlighted the fact that Sokols as an organisation were not part of the Liberation Front, that Sokol members were mainly patriotic and not ideological supporters of communism and as such weren't ideologically acceptable to the Communist Party, therefore the Party terminated the organisation. And this is exactly what Leon Štukelj confirms in his writing. *Politična oporoka Leona Štuklja* (The Political Last Will of Leon Štukelj) written by his son-in-law Franc Pauko was met with an avalanche of criticism in the media. Reading his hidden memoirs will let everyone come to their own conclusions on Leon Štukelj's real political last will.

Leon Štukelj first and foremost saw himself as a humanitarian. Even though the words humanist and humanism have many different meanings, Leon can be described as a humanist, with values

that are based on respect of human dignity and care for others. His documents reflect his awareness that human dignity begins with conception and lasts until death.

Maybe this last paragraph is the most important also for our current times and the future:

that human life is sacred and that if intellectuals want to be humanitarians they have to value life and condemn all crimes against people's lives.