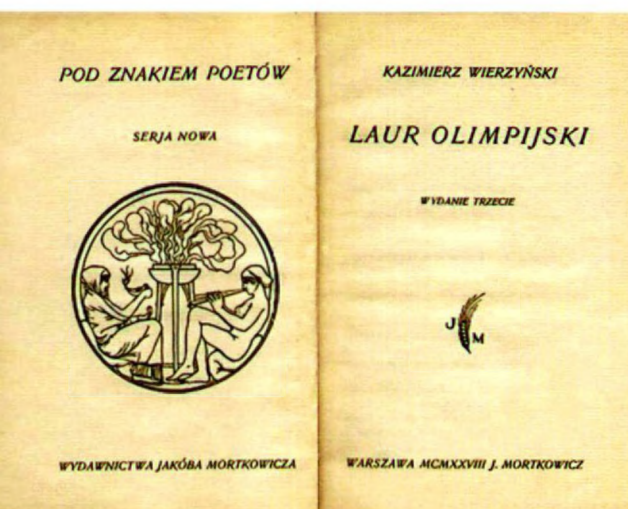


The Olympic Laurel of Kazimierz Wierzyński

By Bernhard Kramer and Richard Stanton



The Polish poet Kazimierz Wierzyński was awarded the gold medal at the Olympic Art Competition in 1928 in Amsterdam for his volume of poetry *Laur Olimpijski* (Olympic Laurel), published in 1927 in Warsaw.

After the presentation of Dorothy Margaret Stuart's *Sword Songs* (silver medal in the 1924 Paris Olympic Literature Contest)¹ we now present another finding: Kazimierz Wierzyński's recently located *LAUR OLIMPIJSKI* (OLYMPIC LAUREL), winner of the gold medal in literature during the Amsterdam 1928 Olympic Games.² In the catalogue of the Olympic Art Exhibition at the Warsaw Historic Museum, 2004, Wojciech Zablocki³ provided some information about the poet, but the gold medal work of poetry was still lost in the shadows of Olympic history.

Considered a masterpiece, it contains 15 individual poems. Each reflects sportsmen in action and praises sport for its moral values and its aspiration to transcend human frailties. Until now, all but one of those poems, Nurmi, virtually vanished from public view.

Born under the German name Wirstlein

Kazimierz Wierzyński was born on 27th August 1894 in Drohobycz (Drohobytsch), Galicia, now part of Ukraine, in a family of German settlers under the name Wirstlein. In 1912 for unknown reasons the family decided to change the surname to Wierzyński.

After studies (philosophy, history and literature) in Cracow, Vienna and Lvov he was drawn into the World War. He was conscripted in the Austrian army and he landed in a Russian Prisoner of War Camp, where he became familiar with the Russian literature. He escaped and hid in Warsaw using his mother's maiden name

Wąsowicz. After the war he was for some time editor-in-chief of *Przegląd Sportowy* (Sports Review), a sport magazine with a circulation of sixty-five thousand copies in 1927. Under him the magazine changed in format, volume and above all in style. In 1936 he became a member of the prestigious Polish Academy of Literature.

In 1939 he left Poland for America, where he was to stay for 20 years settling in Long Island. During this period he also worked for Radio Free Europe. But in 1964 he returned to Europe, settling first in Rome and then in London, where he died on 13rd February 1969. In 1987 his remains were brought to Poland to be buried at the Powązki Cemetery in Warsaw.⁴

His Olympic Cycle was published in seven languages.

His first collection of poems *Wiosna i Wino* (Spring and Wine) appeared in 1915 and is regarded as a joyful welcome of a new political epoch and enthusiastic of juvenile bliss. He compiled his Olympic cycle in 1926–27. The quality of the poems is evidenced by the translations published in seven languages by 1930. This helps to prove that this book of verses ranks among the few really important literary creations honored during the Olympic Art Competitions. The Polish edition contains a few pictures of classical sporting activities, e. g. a sprinter at the start, a pole-vaulter crossing the bar (in a modern style) and a discus-thrower.

We will not present the whole cycle here (all in all there are 277 lines of the finest poetry). Instead we will follow the course of the collection with the first stanzas, starting with the pageantry and solemnity of the opening *Parade of Athletes* up to the conclusion in the serene tranquility of the *Grove of Academe*.

Greater importance is given to those items that have a closer connection with Olympic sports or sportsmen. For example Wierzyński mingles scenes of modern and antique Olympic activities: In *Defilada Atletów* (*Parade of the Athletes*) and in *Spartanin* (*The Spartan*) the string of ancient Hellenic times is played. Modern sport is the focus of 4 poems presenting top stars of their time. These include the goalkeeper Ricardo Zamora, the sprinters Charlie Paddock and Arthur Porritt, the pole-vaulter Charles Hoff, and the great Finnish long distance runner Paavo Nurmi. The remaining poems describe sport disciplines (100 meters, pole vault, discus throwing and cross country running). Two poems, *Oddech* (*Second Wind*) and the last, *Gaj Akademosa* (*The Grove of Academe*) do not belong to these categories, one being physiological, the other philosophical. The titles in the cycle are:

1. *Defilada atletów* (*Parade of the Athletes*)
2. *Oddech* (*Second Wind*)
3. *Match footballowy* (*Football Match*)
4. *100 m* (*The Hundred Meters*)
5. *Paddock i Porritt* (*Paddock and Porritt*)
6. *Skok o tyczce* (*The Pole Vault*)
7. *Fanfara na cześć Karola Hoffa rekordzisty w skoku o tyczce* (*Fanfare in the Honour of Charles Hoff, winner of the pole vault*)
8. *Erminio Spalla* (*Erminio Spalla*)
9. *Panie na start!* (*At the start!*)
10. *Nurmi* (*Nurmi*)
11. *Spartanin* (*The Spartan*)
12. *Dyskobol* (*The Discus Thrower*)
13. *Bieg na przelaj* (*Cross-Country Race*)
14. *Pieśń o Amundsenie* (*Song of Amundsen*)
15. *Gaj Akademosa* (*The Grove of Academe*)

In the opening poem the parading athletes, self-confident and conscious of their youth and strength, greet the audience with a declaration of their philosophy. They are singing their song while marching into the stadium during an opening ceremony of the Olympic Games. The powerful song "batters and storms the shores of all continents" transmitting a secret to the poet: "To him in the triumphant relay we hand on / the Olympic Laurel, emblem of the world's splendor." For readers interested in the original Polish texts we here give the original version of the above texts, translation by Clark Mills:

DEFILADA ATLETÓW

*Nasza pieśń nie zna waszych uniesień i wieszczceń,
Inny sztandar nas zwołał na czołach legł,
My sławimy natchnienie, muskuły i przestrzeń,
Serce, co maratoński wytrzymuje bieg.*

PARADE OF THE ATHLETES

*Our song ignores your ecstasies and revelations;
our own pennant assembles us, unfurled across
our brows
We venerate the life force, muscles and space,
and the heart that endures the endless marathon.*

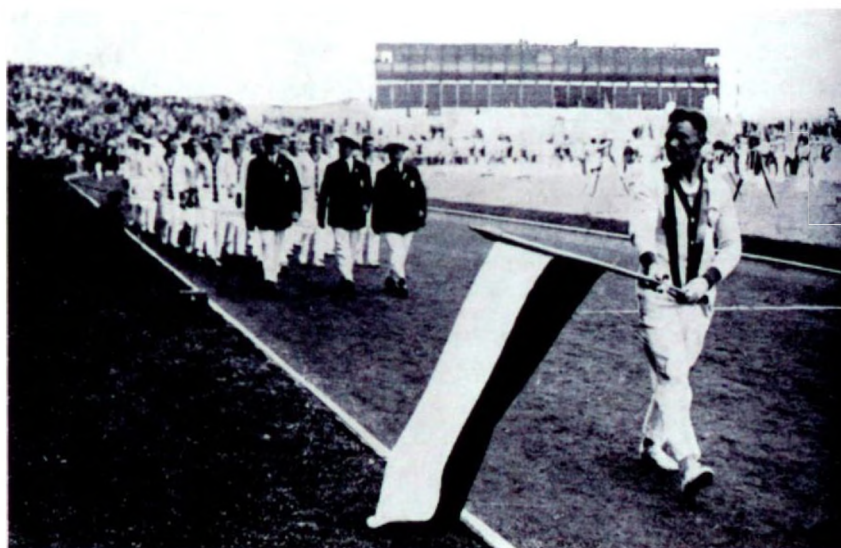
The second poem, *Oddech* (*Second Wind*), is a breathless *tour de force* inveighing the hectic physiological workings of the deep-breathing human body during the performance of a sporting maneuver. Once again the first stanza from the English translation by Bill McFall:

ODDECH

*Wejść we mnie woda wonna, sucha,
Przepluć mnie chłodnym potokiem,
Pod sercem źródło mi wybucha
Wytchnieniem głębokiem.*

SECOND WIND

*Drought—distilled water,
Scent perceived rarely,
Flooding heart's catchment,
Patterns me river.*



In the third poem *Match Footballowy* (*Football match*) the reader witnesses a match-taking place in the "greatest Coliseum in the world". The star athlete in this game between Moscow and Barcelona is the famous Spanish goalkeeper Ricardo Zamora (1901–1978), the man with the magic hands. The first and last stanza in Harriet Brodey's translation:

Procession of the Polish team, which took part in the Olympic Games for the first time in 1924 in Paris.

Photos: Volker Kluge Archives



His brilliant performances in goal earned Ricardo Zamora the nickname of 'the Divine One'. At the age of 19 the Catalan was part of the Spanish Olympic team in 1920 in Antwerp. They received the silver medal after the disqualification of Czechoslovakia (who left the field of play during the final against Belgium as a protest against the referee's decisions).

Right: the legendary leap across the line by the American Charlie Paddock, which proved decisive in the 100 m final, among other events, at the 1920 Games.

MATCH FOOTBALLOWY

*Oto tu jest największe Colosseum świata,
Tu serce żądz i życia bije najwymowniej,
Tu tajemny sens wiąże i entuzjizm brata
Milion ludzi na wielkiej rozsiadłych widowni.*

...

*Widownia oszalała, krzyczy, bije brawo,
Półkole trybun płonie niczym aureola,
I jak wielka tęsknota za zwycięską sławą
Tętni okrzyk stadionu: gola, gola, gola!*

FOOTBALL MATCH

*Here is the greatest Coliseum in the world,
Here beats the heart of all life and desire;
Here an enigma unites, enthusiasm makes kinsmen
Of one million people spread through the arena*

...

*The public releases a wild tumult and roar,
The stand's semicircle is aureole-flamed
And years nostalgic for victory's renown:
Bursts the stadium shout – goal, goal, goal!*

In the fourth poem *100 M* (*The Hundred metres*) the main event of Olympic athletics is poetically refined. In the five cross-rhymed stanzas with its continuous five beat rhythm. The short race is described in detail: the tension before the starting-signal, the moment of the signal and the moment after, when the runner fights his "enemy space" and approaches the "white ribbon screaming, This is the spot!" The "last lunge" in line one of the last stanza seems to anticipate the famous target-leap across the finish line of Charles Paddock, who is one of the protagonists of the next poem. The first stanza translated by Mary Phelps:

100 M

*Każdy muskuł się zwinął w klębek, jak sprężyna,
I na cięciwie ciała niecierpliwie drży,
Motor serca już w uszach walić mi zaczyna,
Gotowe! Starter, strzelać! – Raz – dwa – trzy!*

THE HUNDRED METRES

*Each muscle, coiled and tightened like a spring;
Quivers the bowstring of my frame strung bough.
Heart motor, rising throbs in ear, whirl, sing.
Call it, Starter! Trigger it! One. Two. Now!*

The fifth poem of the cycle, *Paddock and Porritt*, is a unique poetical work. In each of the only eight rhymed lines of this poem, the American Charles William Paddock (1900–1943) and the New Zealander Arthur Porritt (1900–1994), two top sprinters of those days, are effectively contrasted in striking metaphors. For background: from 1934 to 1967 Porritt was a IOC Member and later became Governor of New Zealand and Paddock won two gold and two silver medal in the Olympic Games. Paddock played his own life in the 1925 film *Nine and Three-fifth Seconds*. In the 1981 Oscar winning film *Chariots of Fire* about those races, Paddock was portrayed by Dennis Christopher. Here are the opening lines in Guy Daniels' translation:

PADDOCK I PORRITT

*Jeden ma ręce-wiatraki, drugi wiośluje stopą,
Jeden jest ludzkim kangurem, drugi jest antyloppą.*

PADDOCK AND PORRITT

*One makes his arms go like windmills; the other
makes oars of his feet.
One is a kangaroo – leaping; the other an antelope –
fleet.*





Continuing with his poetic sketches of various athletic events, Wierzyński next moves his poetic prowess to the pole vault. The beauty of the description of this fascinating discipline is stunning. The English version translated by Clark Mills.

SKOK O TYCZCE

*Już odbił się, już płynie! Boską równowagą
Rozpina się na drzewcu i wieje, jak flagą,
Dolata do poprzeczki i z nagłym trzepotem
Przerzuca się, jak gdyby był ptakiem i kotem.*

THE POLE VAULT

*He has rebounded and already floats! In magic
balance
he unfurls from the pole and waves like a bright flag.
He arches toward the bar, and with a quick flutter
shrugs himself over, like a cat or bird.*

In the next poem of only eight rhymed couplets the pole-vault world record holder from Norway is in motion. Wierzyński speaks of him as "the northern gull that nested high in craggy fjord". Charles Hoff (1902–1985) established a world record in 1923 (4,21 m) and 1925 (4,25 m), but in the Paris Olympics of 1924 he had to withdraw because of an injury. He did, however, take part in the 400 and 800 m runs finishing eighth in the latter.⁵

Hoff was disqualified in 1925 because he had received entry fees during the US indoor season. He became a professional pole vaulter in a circus in dress-coat and top hat. His later years were inglorious. As 'Reichsführer' during the occupation of Germany he was neglected after the war.⁶ Clark Mills translates the first two couplets.

FANFARA NA CZEŚĆ KAROLA HOFFA
REKORDZISTY W SKOKU O TYCZCE
*Skok twój jest wodotryskiem,
skok twój jest białą fontanną,
Gdy nad poprzeczkę leciszy,
jesteś uśmiechem i panną.*

FANFARE IN THE HONOUR OF CHARLES HOFF,
WINNER OF THE POLE VAULT
*Your vault is fountain,
water-jet in white light played.
Above the delicate cross-bar,
you are smile and maid.*

Wierzyński next addresses an eminent Italian boxer with a prize-song. Erminio Spalla, was the first Italian to win the European Championship and later a film actor, is portrayed in the translation of the first stanza of the poem to his honor by Harriet Brodey.

ERMINIO SPALLA

*Erminio mógłby dźwigać na piersiach kolumny,
Erminio jest, jak kościół, polotony i dumny,
Każdy ruch opanował, każdy kształt rozumie,
Rozpiera się, jak nawa, trwa, jak spokoj w tumie.*

ERMINIO SPALLA

*Erminio could easily bear pillars on this chest,
Erminio is a church, soaring lofty and strong;
Every motion is controlled, every form comprehended.
He spreads loosely like a nave, tranquil as
domed peace.*



In 1923, Erminio Spalla (1897–1971) became the first Italian boxer to win a European title. He also became famous as a sculptor, actor and opera singer.

Photos: Volker Kluge Archives

The following poem is the second of the set in which women are shown in a sporting activity. With this poem Wierzyński may be recalling the Greek games of antiquity in which girls or women were allowed to participate. It is interesting that the poet succumbs to an almost gaper-perspective of the audience as they watch *the daughters of Sparta, maids of the Amazon* show their pricked breasts ... proud promises of the milk for the future. Given these opening lines it seems less likely his thinking was of the modern Games. The first stanza as translated into English by Eve McFall:

PANIE NA START!

Wola nas trąba grająca
i ostry woła nas dzwonek,
Biegniemy, siostry dziewicze
spartanek i amazonek.

AT THE START!

Caroling bells and clamorous trumpets
proudly announce us,
Fleet-footed daughters of Sparta,
maids of the Amazon college.

The 'Flying Finn'
Paavo Nurmi at a
sporting event in the
German Stadium in
Berlin, where the 1916
Olympic Games were
due to be held.

The next piece is probably one of the Wierzyński's best-known works. Paavo Nurmi (1897–1973), the 'Flying Finn', being immortalized in verse. In the English translation by Ludwik Krzyżanowski – oddly enough – there are only four stanzas of the original six. We have added our own English version of the stanzas two, five and six.



NURMI

Krok mój jest marszem tanecznym,
krok mój, jak serce, uderza,
Jestem zegarem oddechu,
płynę w powietrzu, jak wieża.

Rytm mój zespała się z ziemią,
dźwięczącą bije w nią stopą,
Biegnę przez świat naokoło,
Amerykę i Europę.

Ruch mój za ruchem nastaje,
w ruchome koło się zmienia,
Jestem zegarem wysiłku,
jestem rekordem natchnienia.

Skokiem przesadam trybuny,
mijam krzyczące stadiony,
Niesie mnie wiatr moich skrzydeł,
wiatr wielki i niezrównany.

Skanduję tempo i wzmagam,
przechodzę już do finiszu,
Powiedzcie tym tłumom ludzi –
niech zmiłkną, niech się uciszą.

Nie chcę żadnego zwycięstwa,
nie chcę ich braw, ani krzyku.
Chcę przerwać taśmę i spożąć
na starym, greckim pomniku.

NURMI

My pace, a dancer's tread –
my steps beat like a heart;
clock-tower of breath, I hover
in air, tall and apart.
My rhythm fuses with the earth,
Ringing it pricks my heels,
Circling the world all the time,
America and Europe.

My motion springs from motion –
dial of an iron will,
I create living circles,
ever unspent, unstill.

My rhythm, paced on earth,
rings with a clear sound,
I drink up space, consume
hemispheres, outward bound

I scan the tempo,
approaching the finish,
Tell the masses of people –
to be quiet, to calm down.

beyond the tiered bravos
and shouts, indifferent,
on to my goal: repose
on a Greek pediment.

In the next poem *Spartanin (The Spartan)* Wierzyński takes us back to Hellenic times and a long distance weapon-run. Interestingly he does not aim the spotlight of the poem on a splendid winner but ends in the collapse, perhaps death of the runner. We are made witnesses to a dramatic race in which each massive mile devours mile after mile and in which the runners have to wear their weapons during the race. At the end the runner drops on his Spartan shield, unmanned. The first stanza in English by Jerome Rothenberg:

SPARTANIN

*Drobna garsteczka człowieka
w trudzie się wielkim przesila,
Z nóg setki kroków wyrzuca
i setki oddechów z płuc,
Na bieżnię kręci się wkoło
wielka za milą milą,
Jakież olbrzymie zmęczenie
trzeba na drodze tej zmóc?!*

THE SPARTAN

*A fistful of small man, strained to its final trial,
Whose legs leap steps by hundreds, lungs crack
hundred groans,
Circles a track where massive mile devours mile
That road where dark fatigue's the foe man he
outruns?!*

The following poem deals with an athlete which seems to have been more attractive to artists than most other athletes: the discus thrower – in Wierzyński's words "hero of the watcher's pleasure". Now, Clark Mills translation of the first couplet.

DYSKOBOL

*Rzut mój w rozwartej zaczyna się dłoni,
Rzut mój się kończy – nie wiadomo gdzie,
Dysk, niby ducat połyskliwy, dzwoni
Poza światami, za metami – w mgle!*

THE DISCUS THROWER

*Momentum in the open palm that dies – no
one knows where:
goal's end, world's end and on, my ducat
shines in air.
The discus rises, glitters, dips,
Chimes on the earth, ricochets to a new ellipse!*

The cross-country race is the theme of the thirteenth poem in the series. The poet describes "a flashing herd roaring through the vaulting air". He sees colts, reindeer until the primordial chaos bounds in cosmic masses. The last two lines of the Polish original (Co to za stado wspaniałe! Pół – bogi! Pół – ludzie! Zwierzęta!)

are lacking in Harry Roskolenko's translation: "What a splendid herd! Half God! Half man! Animals!"

BIEG NA PRZELAJ

*Co to za stado wspaniałe
w powietrzu przesiewa się lśnieniem –
Dwie nogi mnożą się w biegu,
gęstnieją i są już tysiącem.*

CROSS COUNTRY RACE

*A flashing herd roars through the vaulting air
As two running legs become the arch of thousands,
Leaping on fearful hooves like nervous colts and
reindeer
To drum beat echoes ascending from the grounds.*

In the longest of the fifteen poems Wierzyński erects a poetical pedestal for the great Norwegian polar explorer Roald Amundsen (1872–1928), the first man to reach the South Pole. In this song Amundsen is sitting in the cockpit of his aeroplane flying over the endless polar desert. From his heights he addresses the worried people impatiently waiting for a sign of life. Jerome Rothenberg translates:



PIEŚŃ O AMUNDSENIE

*Cóż donieść wam o sobie, którzy późną nocą
Przed oknami redakcji bezsennych stoicie,
Z lękiem w oczach pytając się o moje życie,
Błdzi ludzie – niepewni gdzie leczę i po co ?!*

SONG OF AMUNDSEN

*Oh you who huddle late at night before the windows
of a newspaper and ask (fear in your eye)
about my life – pale crowd, uncertain where I race
or why – what message should I send you of myself?*

In 1911 Norwegian explorer Roald Amundsen was the first man to reach the South Pole with four companions. He went missing in 1928 after a flight to try and rescue the Italian polar explorer Umberto Nobile.

We close this article with the last poem of Wierzyński's gold medal Olympic Laurel, *Gaj Akademosa*. The opening poem was a pompous and loud fanfare-like invocation. The last is of a completely different kind. It is a contemplative poem in a pastoral mood, which evokes the atmosphere in Debussy's *L'après-midi d'un faune*. The translation is by Clark Mills:



The Polish sports academy, erected in 1927, which bears the name of Józef Piłsudski, Marshal of the Second Polish Republic.

Photo: Akademia Wychowania Fizycznego (AWF)

GAJ AKADEMOSA

*Liliowy wachlarz zmięczy, wiatrem poruszany.
Chłodzi niebo i ziemię pod płaszczem wieczora,
Drzewa są, jakby miodem napełnione dzbany,
Park – dymiąca błękitnym zapachem amfora.*

*Noc nadejdzie tu niczym słodycz po znużeniu,
Rozmieście w gwiazdach drogę pod szlak Wielkich
Wozów,
Do wszystkich spraw przemówi cicho, po imieniu,
Książę, lampa mądrości, spokojny filozof.*

*Powie, że lata miną, jak jego odmiana,
I przyjdą znów w słonecznym płynące systemie,
Z miechów olbrzymich wieczność dmie
niepowstrzymana*

*Dzierżąc na swym oddechu rozpedzoną ziemię.
Oto jest podróż wielka początku i końca,
Pośród planet rozpięta na kole transmisji,
Człowiek, istota boska i triumfująca,
Nad światem, jak tablica z drogowskazem wisi.*

*Na monumencie swoim w górę wznosił ramiona,
Pod stopami ma ziemię, na rękach niebiosą,
Prowadź nas, mistrzu żywy! Ciska niezmącona
Niech nam ten park zamieni w Gaj Akademosa.*

THE GROVE OF ACADEME

*Wind wanders the wide evening, and fans
cool earth and fading sky. They drift in shadow.
The trees are charged with honey and the meadow,
like an amphora, steams with fragrant azure.*

*Balm for the tired, the night will search and open
through random stars a path for the Great Bear.
The moon, wise lamp, silent philosopher,
speaks to all objects by their unique names*

*and tells how epochs alter like her phases,
vanish but to return, like all that goes.
And the eternal, an immense tide, flows
and the earth skims on that enormous breath.*

*Great voyage of the end and the beginning
amidst the planets linked in a machine!
Triumphant man, visible and unseen,
stands on the world, a milepost and a sign.*

*There monumental with his arms upraised
his feet meet earth, the sky in his hands.
O master, guide us, calm us. Give commands
that make this park the Grove of Academe. ■*

- 1 Bernhard Kramer/Richard Stanton, "Lost Treasures from the Olympic Art Competitions", in: *Journal of Olympic History*, Vol. 18, April 2010, pp. 6–8.
- 2 Kazimierz Wierzyński, *Laur Olimpijski*, Krajowa Agencja Wydawnicza, Białystok 1985. (Our thanks go to Professor Wojciech Liponski from the Akademia Wychowania Fizycznego in Poznań who made this document available). The translations we used: Clark Mills and Ludwik Krzyżanowski (Ed.), *Kazimierz Wierzyński, Selected Poems*, Voyages Press, New York 1959 and Kazimierz Wierzyński, *Olympischer Lorbeer*, Zur IX. Olympiade (aus dem Polnischen übertragen von Josef Heinz Mischel), Horen-Verlag, Berlin Grunewald 1928.
- 3 Wojciech Zablocki/Richard Stanton, *Olympic Art Competitions 1912–1948 Exhibition*, Historic Museum of Warsaw 17 May–30 June 2004.
- 4 Wojciech Zablocki, "Kazimierz Wierzyński", in: *Journal of Olympic History*, Vol. 14, May 2006, Special Edition, p. 34.
- 5 David Wallechinsky/Jaime Loucky, *The Complete Book of Olympics*, Aurum Press Ltd., London 2008, p. 208.
- 6 Volker Kluge, *Olympische Sommerspiele, Die Chronik I*, Sportverlag, Berlin 1997, p. 568.