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Czechoslovak Female Athletes at the International Scene During the Interwar Period between WWI and WWII

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Czechosłowackie lekkoatletki na arenie międzynarodowej w okresie międzywojennym

Streszczenie

W okresie międzywojennym nastąpiła emancypacja światowej lekkoatletyki kobiecej, gdy wyzyny sportowe i zainteresowanie publiczności, zwłaszcza podczas Światowych Igrzysk Kobiet, w wyraźny sposób przyczyniły się do tego, że lekkoatletyka kobieca została zatwierdzona przez członków MKOI i IAAF. Europejska lekkoatletyka kobieca swój rozwój i emancypację w znacznym stopniu zawdzięcza reprezentacji Czechosłowackiego Związku Piłki Ręcznej i Sportów Kobiecych, której nie zabrakło w momencie założenia federacji światowej. Do wzrostu popularności lekkoatletyki kobiecej wśród europejskich fanów sportu w dużej mierze przyczyniły się światowej sławy gwiazdy lekkoatletycznych bieżni, a także rzutni i skocznicy. W konkurencji z lekkoatletkami sportowych mocarstw mierzyć się mogły reprezentantki Polski i Czechosłowacji, i to mimo znacznie skromniejszego zaplecza treningowego. Artykuł poświęcony jest cieszącym się największymi sukcesami czechosłowackim lekkoatletkom okresu międzywojennego, które odniosły zwycięstwa w największych międzynarodowych zawodach lekkoatletyki kobiecej, a dzięki swoim fenomenalnym wyczynom zostały na zawsze wpisane do tabel rekordów światowej lekkoatletyki. Przy two-

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Słowa kluczowe: lekkoatletyka, Światowe Igrzyska Kobiet, Marie Mejzliková I i II, Marie Vidláková.

Abstract

Between the two world wars, women athletics got emancipated, as both sport successes and the viewers' interest contributed to the International Olympic Committee and International Amateur Athletic Federation topmen to accept women athletics. The representatives of the Czechoslovak Federation of Handball and Female Sports and other women sports contributed largely to the development and emancipation of women athletics, and were present at the foundation of the world federation. The women's athletics popularity for European sport public rose mostly thanks to the stars of the track, throw, and jump disciplines at the international events. Women athletes from Poland and Czechoslovakia held up in the competition of big sporting powers, notwithstanding their much more humble training possibilities. This paper focused on the most successful Czechoslovak women athletes that were able to achieve interesting results at the biggest women athletics events and managed to change the historical world tables in athletics. Used sources included their period contemporary journals and magazines and some till now unpublished registry data.

Keywords: Athletics, Women's World Games, Marie Mejzliková I and II, Marie Vidláková.

Introduction

The organised athletics history in the Czech lands started in the middle of 1890's, followed by the foundation of the Czech Amateur Athletic Union (Česká amatérská atletická unie, further ČAAU) in 1897. The year of its foundation, it associated most sports, and only before the WWI, after the representatives of non-athletic sports started founding their own federations, it became associating purely athletics.

Women in the Czech lands entered the sports world in 1894, with their first participation at bicycle races¹. They also practised tennis, considered as suitable for women since the end of the 19th century. In a similar way, the public accepted their participation at swimming contests. At the end of the 19th century, women got "charmed" by skiing, even if more in its recreational form². At the 1900 Olympic Games in Paris, Hedwiga Rosenbaum participated at the tennis competition as a private person "representing" Prague, winning the third places at both women doubles and mixed doubles³.

¹ J. Schütová, *Počátky ženského sportu v Čechách*, [in:] J. Schütová, M. Waic, *Tělesná výchova a sport žen v českých a dalších středoevropských zemích, vznik a vývoj do druhé světové války*, Národní museum, Praha 2003, p. 55.

² Idem, p. 57–58.

³ H. Havránková et al., *Český olympismus: 100 let*, Olympia, Praha 1999, p. 12.

On the 28th of October, 1918, the independent Czechoslovak Republic was declared. The independence euphoria helped the sporting life development mostly in Bohemia. The Czech self-confidence regarding sports was strengthened by the presence of Jiří Stanislav Guth-Jarkovský in the top-management of the International Olympic Committee (IOC). Guth-Jarkovský, mainly thanks to his friendship with Pierre de Coubertin, was one of the founding IOC members, becoming its General Secretary in 1919, on the proposal of de Coubertin⁴.

Together with those of France, the United Kingdom, Italy, and the USA, the representatives of Czechoslovakia were present at the founding congress of the Fédération Sportive Féminine Internationale (FSFI), organised in Paris in October 1921, from the initiative by the French women sport representative Alice Milliat. The main reason for establishing an independent worldwide women sports association was based on the negative opinions of Pierre de Coubertin and of the IAAF President Sigfrid Edström to the participation of women at the Olympic Games athletics competitions⁵.

Women sports development after the WWI corresponded to the social changes and the women social roles modifications with the war time. Men went fighting and women had to take over their roles in factories and families. In the families where the husband died in war or in consequence to the Spanish flu, women had to start caring for incomes and protection of the family. This necessity generally strengthened their self-confidence, so that women did not want any more to do only what they were allowed by men – and this concerned also competition sports activities. Parts of the male public found it very difficult to accept this women emancipation.

On the other hand, a part of sports functionaries appreciated the attractiveness of women's competitions. In 1921, a sports club in Monte Carlo, Monaco, organised the first international women races, formally named Le 1er Meeting International d'Education Physique Féminine de Sports Athlétiques, nicknamed "Women Olympics" or "Monte Carlo Games". Only five countries participated at the first edition: France, Italy, Switzerland, the United Kingdom, and Norway. Gold medals from ten organised athletic competitions (60 m run, 250 m run, 800 m run, 74 m hurdles run, 4 × 75 m relay, 4 × 200 m relay, high jump, long jump, put shot, and javelin) were distributed to women from France and the United Kingdom.

The Czechoslovak Federation of Handball and Female Sports was established already in June 1920. Differently from the world federation, having the women sports emancipation for their goal, the Czechoslovak Federation of Handball and Female Sports had it "just" as one of their goals. Their probably main goal was the promotion and spreading of the Czech handball, played by both men and

⁴ F. Kolář, *Jiří Stanislav Guth-Jarkovský, Český olympijský výbor*, Olympia, Praha 2011, p. 70.

⁵ I. Parčina, V. Šiljak, A. Perović, E. Plakona, *Women's World Games, "Physical Education and Sport Through the Centuries"* 2014, 1(2), p. 51.

women. This handball variety was developed by Czech physical education teachers already before the WWI. They considered it to be a perfect sport for women, and hoped that Czech handball would spread to other European countries after the war. This does not mean that the handball federation would neglect the support of women athletics. This can be shown by the fact that the officials, only men, organised the participations of Czechoslovak women as country representatives since the second international competition in Monte Carlo in 1922.

Women's World Games

One year after its establishment, on the 20th of August 1922, the FSFI organised the first Women's World Games in Paris, while five countries participated. Originally, these were called Women Olympic Games. Even their dramaturgy copied the Olympic Games scenario. It was decided that women games would take place every four years, starting by a defile of national teams headed by the team leader carrying the national flag. The games were opened by Alice Milliat using the words "I declare open the Women's Olympic Games"⁶. The prize of the French government for winning the games, based on the ranking of nations, was overwhelmingly won by England, the second place was taken by the team of the USA, only two points before the French team. With a larger point difference, Czechoslovak women took the fourth place, the Norwegians finished fifth. The Czechoslovak sprinter Marie Mejzlíková left with a memorable score of establishing five new world records. The IOC members protested against naming the games as Olympic, as they considered the term Olympic to be a protected brand, reserved only to the "true" Olympic Games. FSFI yielded and the second edition was already called Women's World Games.

The second Women's World Games were to take place in Brussels, but the Belgian capital gave up their organisation. The FSFI officials found a replacement organiser very fast – the Swedish city of Gothenburg. It was quite a good choice. In Sweden, women's physical education had a long tradition, mainly thanks to the Swedish gymnastics' reformer Elin Falk. As a result, the expected Women's World Games attracted a high level of interest by the public. All games' participants received a flamboyant welcome and lots of sympathies – including the Czechoslovak athletes. The king of Sweden offered a cup for the winning national team, while the crown prince became the patron of the games. The organiser did not want "only" to gain social support. All participants of the Women's World Games in Gothenburg were offered free accommodation and boarding⁷. Eight countries participated

⁶ G.U. Pfister, *Olympische Spiele nur für Männer?: Auseinandersetzungen über die Beteiligung von Frauen an den Olympischen Spielen*, [in:] *Olympische Spiele*, LIT Verlag, Münster 2001, p. 119–120.

⁷ Idem, p. 122.

at the Second Women's World Games in Gothenburg, between the 27th and 29th of August, 1926. The prize of the organising country to the most successful national team was defended by England, followed by France and Sweden. Czechoslovakia finished fourth, the following teams being those of Japan, Poland, Latvia, and Belgium. One of the greatest personalities of the games, all-embracing athlete and an important promoter of women's sport, the Japanese Kinue Hitomi, won in long jump and standing long jump.

Even if it was her first appearance, the pretty Polish athlete Halina Konopacka won the discus competition, repeating the gold medal from the Olympic Games in Amsterdam 1928, where she was also declared the most beautiful sportswoman of the Games. After ending her successful career, she had a function in the FSFI technical commission between 1934 and 1936. Thanks to her sports successes, and also due to her marriage with the Polish minister of finance Ignacy Matuszewski, she was a member of the social elite of Poland⁸.

In Gothenburg, the Czechoslovak flag was raised twice, thanks to the victories of Marie Vidláková in two handed shot put and of Ludmila Sychrová, who changed the world record for 100 m hurdles to 14.4 s already during the heats. Other successes of the team, promoting Czechoslovakia, included the FSFI decision of organising the III Women's World Games in 1930 in Prague. The very strong position of that time Czechoslovakia can be shown by the comment of the vice-president Václav Valoušek for the illustrated sports magazine "Star", mentioning that "the preliminary meeting about accepting Germany into the FSFI was led by Mma Milliat for the whole 3 hours only on the presence of our delegates and those from France"⁹.

During three days between the 6th and the 8th of September 1930, sportswomen representing 18 countries were competing at a newly built stadium at Letná, Prague, at the occasion of the III Women's World Games. The team of Germany dominated the games and received the prize of the Czechoslovak government. The Golden medal was awarded by the FSFI President Ms. Milliat to the Polish sprinter Stanisława Walasiewicz, who helped – by her three wins – Poland to reach the second team position before England¹⁰. Insufficient development of youth and regular training activities caused that the Czechoslovak athletes reached very few successes. Some negative influence was caused by the organisational changes in Czechoslovak women's athletics. Czechoslovak athletes left the Czechoslovak Federation of Handball and Female Sports in 1928 and entered the Czechoslovak Amateur Athletic Union.

⁸ A.K. Kunert, *Pulkownik Matuszewski. Jedna rodzina – trzy Virtuti*, "Przegląd Bezpieczeństwa Wewnętrznego" 2012, 7(4), p. 211.

⁹ "Star", 7th of September 1926, No. 27, p. 4.

¹⁰ T. Drozdek-Małolepsza, *Women's World Games (1922–1934)*, "Prace Naukowe Akademii im. Jana Długosza w Częstochowie. Kultura Fizyczna" 2014, 13(1), p. 64.

Although there were at least twenty competitors in each race, now new world record was set¹¹. This was certainly influenced by a common competition rules setting of FSFI and IAAF in 1927, naming a list of competitions for world records, unifying the height of the hedges, and also the weights of some tools that are used till nowadays¹².

The Women's World Games were the last ones to see the participation of Kinue Hitomi, who died only a year after her long jump triumph there, at the age of 24 years. In order to honour her, one of the organisers of the III Women's World Games, the Czechoslovak Handball Association dedicated her a commemorative plaque at the Olšany Cemeteries in Prague in 1932 with her name. Nowadays, the Czech Olympic Committee takes care of this "faraway grave"¹³.

The number of women's sports events increased also in Czechoslovakia. Czechoslovak women had therefore occasions to measure their skills with international competition (athletes), mostly with sportswomen from that time Yugoslavia, France, Poland, and even Japan. During their visit to Prague in August 1934, the Japanese team did not forget to honour their record holder K. Hitomi by visiting her plaque at the Olšany Cemeteries¹⁴.

On an unusual autumn day of the 7th of October 1923, the first national track and field championships took place at the Slavia stadium in Prague. Only since 1936, athletics competitions of men and women together are organized in Czechoslovakia. Competitions including the lower levels, those between cities, or the duel Bohemia – Moravia, took place. After the successful participation of Czechoslovak women athletes at the 1934 IV Women's World Games, their national championships are enriched by adding cross-country races and athletic "triathlon". Women took part also at the important home international race competitions named after the first Czechoslovak President T.G. Masaryk – the Masaryk Games. The first edition took place in Prague in June 1921.

The Women's World Games success made the IOC change their opinion and include women's athletics into the Olympic Games programme. This was proposed by the IAAF President Sigfrid Edström and accepted by the IOC at their 25th meeting in Amsterdam, 1926. The women's athletics and gymnastics were added to the programme of the 1928 IXth Amsterdam Olympics. Czechoslovak women athletes did not participate at these nor the following 1932 Los Angeles Olympics. The first Czechoslovak woman athlete at the Olympics, Markéta Schieferová, finished twelfth in discus throw at the 1936 Berlin Olympic Games.

At the end of the 1930's, women's athletics began to be combined to the men's athletic competitions on both national and international levels. Internation-

¹¹ K. Nedobitý, *Ženská atletika*, Č.A.T, České Budějovice 1944, p. 163.

¹² Idem, p. 154.

¹³ "Lidové noviny", 31st of August 1932, year 40, No. 440, available from <http://kramerius.cbvk.cz> [accessed: 18.05.2020].

¹⁴ "Star", 23rd of August 1934, No. 34, p. 2.

ally, the inclusion of women athletes into the IAAF was finalised and the FSFI stopped existing.

The Most Successful Women Athletes Representing Czechoslovakia

Marie Mejzlíková I and II

These two women form a curiosity that can hardly ever be repeated. All-purpose athletes and pioneers of the Czechoslovak athletics, with the same first and family names combination, were successfully active at the world-level competitions in the 1920's. Although that time Czechoslovakia was rather a smaller country in the interwar Europe, they contributed to its fame. In order to not to confuse them in the statistical records, even the fans used to call them Marie Mejzlíková I and Marie Mejzlíková II. There was no family link between them. At the national competitions, it was possible to distinguish them thanks to different clubs' membership. They met for the first time only when competing at an athletics event, representing two different clubs – SK Smíchov and SK Úředníků Karlín. Both of them changed the world records several times, but neither the Czechoslovak athletics institutions nor sports journalists valued their successes enough.

Marie Mejzlíková I (Riedlová after the first marriage, later Černá)

Marie “I” was from a middle-class sporting family. She was born on the 16th of December 1902 in Prague, five years after the marriage of her parents František Mejzlík and Marie, born Fenclová¹⁵. Her father was a swimming pool lifeguard, and since 1922, he was the owner of a watering-place on the Podolí harbour dike. It was called Mejzlíkárna and consisted of cabins to change and a typical platform, floating on the Vltava (Moldau) river surface, with a shallow swimming pool for non-swimmers. In cooperation with a close Czech sports club Vyšehrad 1907 (further ČSK Vyšehrad), the watering-place served as a training centre for the club, with chosen cabins reserved for competition swimmers. These were trained by a participant of the 1920 Antwerp Olympic Games, Alois Hrašek¹⁶. This proves the good relations of the watering-place owner with Prague sports clubs. It is also not surprising that Marie started with athletics in 1919 as a member of ČSK Vyšehrad. Her mother Marie Fenclová was a housewife. Also, the other two daughters of the family were successful sportswomen. One of them competed in swimming and won the 400 m freestyle gold medal at the first cham-

¹⁵ Archiv hl. m. Prahy, Sběrka matrik VYŠ N 14, Kniha narozených 1897–1911, p. 217, available from <http://katalog.ahmp.cz> [accessed: 20.05.2020].

¹⁶ *Z historie pražských plováren – Mejzlíkárna*, available from <https://vysehradskej.cz> [accessed: 20.05.2020].

pionship of Czechoslovakia in 1919, reaching another title at the double distance event in 1922¹⁷. The other sister played handball, which was also the sport Marie started with. Marie married twice. On the 10th of June 1926, she married a one-year older athlete Eduard Riedl¹⁸. In that period of time, Eduard Riedl raced for AC Sparta Prague and was specialised in middle-distance running and the 4 × 400 m relay. In 1924, he won the 800 m national title. He won other titles and Czech records in relays. Between 1924 and 1927, he represented Czechoslovakia twice in interstate matches. For his civil job, he worked as an accounting clerk of the Ministry of health. This marriage lasted only shortly. “The regional court in Prague declared by a valid resolution of the day 19th of March 1930 [...] this marriage, which was judicially from bed and board divorced [...] as dissolved”¹⁹. The cause of the divorce is not mentioned in the archives. Four years later, on the 18th of August 1934, she married to Antonín Černý in Podolí and since, she used the family name Černá²⁰.

From ČSK Vyšehrad, she moved to SK Smíchov, which she represented in the period 1921 to 1927. She concluded her career in 1928–1929 in one of the most important Czech clubs, Slavia Prague. In the interwar Czechoslovakia, i.e. between 1919 and 1938, Slavia Prague was the centre of Czechoslovak athletics. Their athletes won 167 men titles in that period²¹. Starting later, basically the same happened for women, as their first championship was only in 1923²².

Marie competed mainly in sprint and throw disciplines, which would be unthinkable nowadays. For SK Smíchov, she won two 200 m national titles in 1923 and 1924 (28.6 and 28.2 s), one at the 250 m event (36.0 s) and one in two handed shot put (16.94 m and 18.035 m). The shot weighed 3.628 kg and the final score was determined by the sum of the results with left and right hand. Up to the nowadays rules, the shot put for women weighs 4 kg (one handed) and the Czech Helena Fibingerová holds the indoor world record in one handed shot put with the result of 22.50 m from 1977; this shows that athletics was at the beginning of its development after the WWI. Marie Mejzlíková I won medals also in the 100–200–100–200 relay, which she ran (due to an insufficient number of competitors) together with colleague sportswomen from SK Hradec Králové, SK Třebíč, and

¹⁷ F. Neuls et al., *Plavání*, Olomouc n.d., p. 12, available from <http://iks.upol.cz> [accessed: 20.05.2020].

¹⁸ Archiv hl. m. Prahy, Sběrka matrik MAG 034, Kniha sňatků 1926, p. 215, available from <http://katalog.ahmp.cz> [accessed: 20.05.2020].

¹⁹ Idem.

²⁰ Archiv hl. m. Prahy, Sběrka matrik VYŠ N 14, Kniha narozených 1897–1911, p. 217. available from <http://katalog.ahmp.cz> [accessed: 20.05.2020].

²¹ J. Jirka et al., *Sto let královny*, Česká atletika, Olomouc 1997.

²² P. Hladík, *Umístění českých a Czechoslovakých sportovkyň na významných zahraničních i domácích soutěžích do roku 1938*, [in:] J. Schütová, M. Waic, *Tělesná výchova a sport žen v českých a dalších středoevropských zemích, vznik a vývoj do druhé světové války*, Národní muzeum Praha 2003, p. 164–166.

Moravská Slavia Brno, and in discus throw, with a discus of 1.5 kg. Nowadays, women compete with a 1 kg discus.

She won other titles for SK Slavia Praha in the period 1927–1928: in relay 4×100 m, both one-handed and two-handed javelin 28.69 m and 46.60 m respectively. At that time, she was competing with the family name Riedlová. Her versatility is confirmed by medal positions in other disciplines: 100 and 200 m, shot put, discus, javelin – all of those both one-handed and two-handed.

As Marie came from a larger family, she often competed against her family members. For instance, at a sporting day event in September 1920 in České Budějovice, she defeated her sixteen years old sister Růžena in the 75 m race and in long jump, and she defeated there in shot put also her father's sister, aunt Stanislava, who was one year younger. Seen the fact that on that day, there was a double match in women's handball in České Budějovice between the local club SK České Budějovice the Vyšehrad one, it is quite probable that on the same day, the Mejzlík ladies contributed to the victory of Vyšehrad in handball as well²³.

She reached international achievements as well. At the I Masaryk Games in 1921, with participants from France, Sweden or Italy, she won the 60 m race and 75 m hurdles, both standing long jump and long jump, shot put of a 5 kg shot²⁴. She contributed also to the victory of the Czechoslovak women's team at the Fête de printemps in May 1922 in Paris, at Stade Pershing, finishing first in the 200 m race, the 4×100 m relay, and in shot put. At the III Women's Olympics in 1923 Monte Carlo, she dominated the two-handed shot put competition and finished second in the 250 m race. At a similar event, organised on the 4th of August 1924 at the London Stamford Bridge stadium, she finished third in the 250 m race, behind one of the stars, the English Mary Lines, and won in shot put. Up to the British press, twenty thousand spectators were present²⁵.

She took part also at the first Women's World Games in Paris in August 1922. In the untraditional discipline 4×110 m hurdles, her relay team won the third place in a race where 4 teams were present – England, France, Czechoslovakia, and the USA, who were disqualified. Her two-handed shot put result of 17.01 m brought her the fourth place, with the difference of 36 cm behind the bronze American Rosenbaum. The title result changed the world record, when the American Goldbold placed the 3.628 kg shot to the combined distance of left and right hand 20.22 m. Marie also participated in the 300 m races, but she did not reach the finals.

Marie Mejzlíková I represented Czechoslovakia in three interstate matches, and she held also some world records – two of them from the 21st of May 1922 Paris events of 200 m (28.60 s) and as a member of the 4×100 m relay team (53.20 s).

²³ "Republikán", 9th of September 1920, No. 72, p. 2.

²⁴ "ČAS", 7th of June 1921, year 31, No. 126, p. 2.

²⁵ *Women's Olympiad*, "The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser" 6.08.1924, p. 4, available from <https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg> [accessed: 20.05.2020].

She added another one in the same year, on the 30th of July, when her javelin reached 24.95 m at the event in Prostějov.

The curator of a 3D sports collection of the Czech National Museum, Šárka Rámišová, mentioned in her interview for iSport.cz (on the 7th of April, 2019) that “In the collections of the Department of the History of Physical Education and Sports, we have unique track spikes of Marie Mejzlíková. Up to eyewitnesses, they were imported by the Czech-American Josef Amos Pípal from the USA. Therefore, they were the first track spikes for women in our country”²⁶. Leather track spikes surely gave her some advantage against her competitors running in slippery training shoes, but their quality was at the beginning of their development. For instance, the Adidas spikes worn by the Los Angeles 1932 Olympic Games bronze medallist German Arthur Janath weighed 216 g. When the Jamaican Usain Bolt set a new 100 m world record in 2009, his Puma spikes weighed only 149 g. Also, the position of the spikes in the shoe has changed, nowadays more using the external part of the foot; and the length of the spikes changed, due to the development of artificial surfaces to max. 9 mm outdoor and 6 mm indoor. At the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century, spikes were not cheap at all. A pair made by Spalding Company from kangaroo leather cost 6 dollars, which was quite a sum²⁷.

After 1929, Marie Mejzlíková I did not commit herself to athletics any more, as she managed the family-owned watering-place together with her brother Josef after the death of their father in 1926. In 1939, she accepted an offer to become the director of a newly built watering-place in Prachov Rocks.

Prof. Josef Přidal, an international athletics referee and official of the Czechoslovak Federation of Handball and Female Sports, who was one of the founders of women’s athletics in the newly established Czechoslovak Republic, confirmed that “she was a humble girl, uncommonly scrupulous, diligent and versatile, who won most competitions and everywhere, she won sympathies by her agreeable manners. She liked to go to promotion competition events, anywhere she was invited”²⁸.

She died at the age of almost 79 years in Prague, on the 30th of May, 1981.

Marie Mejzlíková II (married Majerová)

Compared to her colleague, Marie “II” was from more humble origins. Her father Josef Mejzlík was from a blue-collar family, and he was a shoemaker. Her mother Josefa Nováková was born in a small village into a baker’s family. Marie, baptised Otílie, was born only eight years after their marriage, on the 13th of De-

²⁶ Available from <https://isport.blesk.cz> [accessed: 7.04.2020].

²⁷ Blog Kippen C. 2020 *Olympic Shoes*, available from <http://olympicshoes.blogspot.com> [accessed: 20.05.2020].

²⁸ J. Jirka et al., *Sto let královny, Česká atletika 1997*. p. 116.

ember 1903 in Prague. The register states “Velký Břevnov č. 81, Smíchov county”²⁹. Břevnov was not yet a part of Prague, it was added to Prague only on the 6th of February 1922 by a law fusing neighbouring cities and villages to Prague and forming a new Capital of Prague³⁰. The indication “II” does not mean she would be behind her namesake, but more the fact she was born one year later. Similarly to her colleague, she started with handball. Women’s athletics was in the interwar Czechoslovakia in its beginning phase, and the development was in the hands of enthusiasts without athletic experience. The fact that Marie became the most successful Czechoslovak woman athlete between the wars and the world’s fastest woman, proves her above-average talent and excellent physical dispositions.

She started her athletic career at the sports club SK Úředníků Karlín, located on the Prague island Štvanice, close to her home in Prague Holešovice. She remained faithful to her club for the whole sporting career, and mainly thanks to her, SK Úředníků Karlín won the 1923 and 1924 titles of the best women’s team of Czechoslovakia.

At the age of seventeen, in June 1921, she started her competition career at an athletic event in Prague. It was in the framework of women’s sports at the I Masaryk Games, in the 60 m race and 75 m hurdles³¹. She did not reach any remarkable success, but she showed her potential. She proved this potential the following year in Paris, when she fascinated Paris twice by her results.

Her first remarkable success was at the international event Fête de Printemps on the 21st of May 1922 at the Stade Pershing in Paris. She won the opening discipline of 80 m (11.0 s), and in long jump (461 cm). With a lead of ten meters, she concluded the relay competition in a record time 53.2 s. This 4×100 m relay race was a very nervous one. The first runner of the winning team was her namesake Marie Mejzlíková I. The race, where the Czechoslovak runners increased their lead at every stage, was nervous because of the start – it had to be repeated several times³².

Her second noteworthy appearance was in August 1922, at the first Women’s World Games. During her 60 m heat, she beat the 50 m world record with the time 6.4 s and secured her place in the finals. In the finals, where four sports-women were present, she beat two English runners Lines and Callebout and the French Prost in a new world record 7.6 s. Also her intermediate times, measured during her 100 y heat were record breaking – 50 m in 6.4 s, 60 m in 7.6 s, and 80 m in 10 s. She ran the whole distance of 100 y (equal to 91.44 metres) in 11.4 s,

²⁹ Archiv hl. m. Prahy, Sběrka matrik BŘV N 17, *Knihá narozených 1903–1907*, p. 52, available from <http://katalog.ahmp.cz> [accessed: 21.05.2020].

³⁰ Zákon č. 114/1920 ze dne 6. 2. 1920, kterým se sousední obce a osady slučují s Prahou [Act No. 114/1920 of 6 February 1920, which merges neighboring municipalities and settlements with Prague].

³¹ “ČAS”, 7th of June 1921, year 31, No. 126, p. 2, available from <http://www.digitalniknihovna.cz/mzk> [accessed: 18.05.2020].

³² *Vzpomínky na slavný závod do Francie*, [in:] *Almanach III. světových ženských her v Praze 6.–8. září 1930*. Výbor III. světových ženských her 1930. p. 62.

which no other woman before her managed. Her maximum efforts during the heat, combined with non-specifically oriented trainings, adumbrated Marie's loss in the 100 y finals, in which the English Callebout could win with 12.0 s. The resulting time of Marie was not measured. However, the results of Marie Mejzlíková II surpassed the Czechoslovak journalists' expectations. Only a week before the Paris games, they published an article stating: "Women's Olympic Games in Paris. [...] According to the latest news arrived from Paris, the American and English teams have already been diligently training for 14 days, so the chances of our sportswomen are not big, even though we can hope that our team will try hard to get by in the most honourable way at this big sporting event. The delegation is leaving on Tuesday morning"³³. She concluded her successful appearance by winning the third place in relay. After the comeback from the world games, at a Prague event on the 23rd of September, 1923, she improved her world record in long jump by adding 14 cm to reach 530 cm, and she was the member of a record-breaking 4 × 75 m relay³⁴.

Marie took part at three national championships, winning 7 individual titles and 2 relay ones. During her first national women's track championship on the 7th of October 1923 in Prague, she won the long jump event with 494 cm, with a half-a-meter lead in front of the second-place winner. She added two more wins at the shortest track sprints of 60 m and 100 m. She finished the 60 m race in mere 8.4 s, and in the direct encounter with Marie Mejzlíková I, she won the 100 m clearly with the time of 13.2 s, while her namesake did not manage to run under 14 s. At the coming national championship, she defended her 100 m title in the same time and her long jump title with 483 cm. She added 2 titles as a member of the relay team of her club SK Úředníků Karlín. Meanwhile for the 4 × 100 m relay, she was the finishing runner, she started the 100–200–100–200 metres relay. During the shortest sprint event, this time the 80 m one, she lost very narrowly to her colleague Božena Šrámková, who retaliated her tight long jump loss. Her last national championship appearance was on the 15th and 16th of August 1925 in Prague, when she confirmed her sprinting skills and won the distances of 60 m (8.4 s) and 100 m (13.2 s), which she dominated with a lead of a whole second in front of her future successor Zdena Smolová. This corresponds to a lead equal to about 8 m.

We have only little information about the life of Marie Mejzlíková II after she finished her athletic career. In 1930, she married and started using the family name Majerová. In 1968, after the Warsaw Pact invasion, she emigrated to the German Federal Republic. She died in August 1994, aged 90 years³⁵.

³³ "Lidové noviny", 14th of August 1922, No. 404, p. 4.

³⁴ "Národní listy", 25th of September 1923, year 63, No. 263, p. 2.

³⁵ Bibliografický slovník, Historický ústav AV ČR.

Marie Vidláková (married Kuchovská)

Throws and puts belong to those athletic disciplines, in which Czech athletes are successful already since the times of František Janda-Suk³⁶. Marie Vidláková was one of the forerunners and pioneers of Czech throws in the interwar Czechoslovakia. Besides athletics, this all-round sportswoman swam and played handball and tennis. She was born in Třebíč on the 4th of September 1904. Her father Josef was a shoemaker and her mother was from a workers' family³⁷. Baptised as Marie, she received her catholic confirmation on the 28th of September 1919 by the bishop Norbert Klein³⁸.

When she was sixteen, she started playing handball for the Workers sports club Třebíč (Dělnický sportovní klub Třebíč, further DSK Třebíč). With them she won the title of the West-Moravian district. After three years of playing for DSK Třebíč, Marie (usually nicknamed Máňa) was accepted as a member of the club SK Achilles on the 22nd of May 1923. This club associated football and women's handball, but thanks to local enthusiasts, it was dominated by athletics – although the premises were unsuitable for athletics. In June 1923, SK Achilles fused in Třebíč with a richer Czech sports club, which possessed much better equipped sporting premises, and they were joined also by some members of disappeared Třebíč clubs. A new institution was established: Sports society Třebíč (Sportovní společnost Třebíč, further SS Třebíč)³⁹.

At the first Czechoslovak track championship, Marie Vidláková won the third place in two-handed javelin (800g) with 34.42 m, wearing the colours of SS Třebíč. In 1924, she left for work to Brno, where she continued with athletics in the local club Moravian Slavia (Moravská Slavie) and she regularly represented Czechoslovakia in handball. To better combine her job and training, she moved to SK Židenice in 1926, as their stadium was only 5 minutes away from her job.

Marie Vidláková won seven national titles. In 1924, she won the discus throw (1.5 kg discus, 24.39 m), ball-with-loop throw and handball ball throw hod. In 1925, she won the title in the one-kilogram discus throw (29.18 m) and the 100 y hurdles (15.4 s). In 1926, she won the two-handed shot put (3.628 kg, 19.34 m) and in 1929, the 80 m hurdles race (14.4 s).

She regularly represented Czechoslovakia in both athletics and handball. At the II Women's World Games in Gothenburg in 1926, she won the two-handed shot put with 19.54 m. At the III Women's World Games in Prague in 1930, she won the world champion title as a member of the handball national team. After getting married, named Kuchovská, she was a member of the national team at the

³⁶ F. Janda-Suk took 2nd place in the discus throw at the 1900 Olympic Games in Paris.

³⁷ Městský úřad Třebíč, Matrika narození [Třebíč City Hall, Birth register]_1904.

³⁸ Norbert Klein was a catholic oblate, the 10th bishop of Brno and Grand Master of the Teutonic Order.

³⁹ P. Navrkal, M. Zeibert, *Třebíč a královna*, Akcent, Třebíč 2014, p. 18–24.

IV Women's World Games in 1934 London. However, a tendon of Achilles injury impeached her from competing in athletics since 1930.

She set seven individual world records – in 1 kg shot put, in both one-handed and two-handed javelin (800 g), in shot put (both 3.628 kg and 4 kg), and in the handball ball throw. As the first Czechoslovak competing sportswoman, she got over 10 m in shot put in 1927. She still holds the world records in those disciplines that have been eliminated from the athletics rules – two-handed shot put with a 3.628 kg shot (20.03 m) and the throw of a 300 g handball ball (28.63 m).

After ending her athletic career, she was the best player of the L.T.C Židenice and played tennis recreationally till her old age. Her son Stanislav Kuchovský, born on the 29th of May 1942, had his sports successes as the follower of Marie Vidláková-Kuchovská, as he was a top-rank Brno tennis player and later a well-known tennis coach⁴⁰. Marie Vidláková-Kuchovská died in Brno on the 13th of September 1994.

Epilogue

After the failure at the Prague Women's World Games, Czechoslovak athletics reached a big, even if temporary success at the IV Women's World Games, which took place from the 9th till the 11th of August 1934 in London. There, the Czechoslovak sportswomen wished to become one of the best world teams again. Also the Czechoslovak press wrote more about this event, mainly the magazine *Star*, which reported already from July 1934 on how the whole world sportswomen were preparing for the competition. Their news was completed with photographs, e.g. from trainings of the English⁴¹ or Japanese⁴² sportswomen, and they did not forget the Czechoslovak team, whose results were allowing to assume good results at the biggest Women's World Games. Contemporary press tried to describe the course of events at the Women's World Games in the most attractive way possible, also by using the participation of and writing about the exotic Japanese competitors. Some newspaper titles like *Yellow and white ones at the starting line*⁴³, completed with photographs of Japanese and Czechoslovak athletes having the starting position, could probably not be used in nowadays sports press, but in 1934, no-one considered them as racist, and the Japanese athletes were the favourite ones for the public in Gothenburg, Prague and London.

Directly from the stadium, the news was coming from the reporter of *Star*, participant of the Games, and one of the world's best athletes of that time, nicknamed "recordwoman", the Czechoslovak representant Zdena Koubková. In her

⁴⁰ Internetová encyklopedie města Brna [Internet encyclopedia of the city of Brno], available from <https://encyklopedie.brna.cz> [accessed: 1.06.2020].

⁴¹ "Star", 12th of July 1934, No. 28, p. 2.

⁴² "Star", 23rd of August 1934, No. 34, p. 2.

⁴³ "Star", 19th of July 1934, No. 29, p. 7.

first message, Koubková wrote about her colleague Štěpánka Pekarová, who later won the third place in shot put and the newly introduced pentathlon (100 m, long jump, shot put, javelin, high jump): “She easily handles the heaviest luggages and her ability to order them fast seems to be a promise of her best form”⁴⁴. In her second letter, with a suggesting title: “I am happy I won”⁴⁵, she described the heats and finals of her 800 m competition, which she won in a new world record:

All is according to the plan. Already before finishing the first half, I perform the first attack, and when I see it is successful, I increase my speed and break from the other ones [...] In the sprint part, I do my best, because I want a time result, a really good time result [...] 2,12.4 – it might have been even better, but I think that I keep something for home, why should I not keep something for the cheering of my Prague friends⁴⁶.

Her world record did not last long, even if it was not beaten. After the games, Zdena Koubková underwent several medical examinations and a plastic surgery, which changed her into a man. This act was officially concluded by a decree of the Ministry of Interior on the 8th of October 1936, which allowed a modification of the registered gender from female to male and the change of the name from Zdena to Zdeněk⁴⁷. Zdeněk Koubek further engaged in sport, he played rugby for Říčany, but the records of Zdena Koubková were eliminated from historical tables. The same decision was made also by Štěpánka Pekarová and her records were cancelled after the end of WWII in 1945, too⁴⁸.

Women’s World Games in London in 1934, became the last event of the individual women’s sport and after the Olympic Games in Berlin, FSFI stopped its activities.

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⁴⁴ “Star”, 16th of August 1934, No. 33, p. 10.

⁴⁵ Ibidem.

⁴⁶ Ibidem.

⁴⁷ Zemský archiv v Opavě, Sbíрка matrik Severomoravského kraje, M XI 40, Matrika farního úřadu v Paskově 1897–1915 [Provincial Archive in Opava, Collection of Registries of the North Moravian Region, M XI 40, Register of the Parish Office in Paskov 1897–1915], p. 226, available from <http://digi.archives.cz> [accessed: 03.06.2020].

⁴⁸ P. Kovář, *Přiběh české rekordwoman: zákulisí největšího sportovního skandálu první republiky*. Pejdlova Rosička s.r.o., Jarošov nad Nežárkou 2017, p. 211–212.

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