

Olympic Fever

Text written by Louise (Regehr) Wiens, Leamington, Ontario, February 2014

Even before the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi, Russia officially began, they were already rife with controversy. National evening news reporters relayed accounts of both shoddy and unfinished construction projects, wild dogs running around the areas, and pointed out the poor quality of food and water. As in Beijing, China, peasants were displayed on the TV screen being forcibly removed from their shanties to make room for the new super highways being built. Several snowboarders have suffered accidents during their warm ups, blaming the incorrect slope of the hill. Daily we hear of “threats of terror,” the latest being homemade “toothpaste bombs.” Putin talks about “no gays” being allowed. Due to all this controversy, many families and friends of athletes are presumed not to be attending. North American athletes have been advised not to wear their patriotic gear off the premises. Even the parents of our own local homegrown Olympian, Meghan Agosta, a star of the Canadian women's hockey team, had not planned on travelling across the pond.

In 2007, when The International Olympic Committee awarded the 2014 games to Sochi, Russia, Prime Minister Putin was reported as wanting to prove to the world that his country could also be a big player on the “world stage.” That this would be the face of his emerging “New Russia.” The modern Olympic Games, the leading international sporting event, were inspired by the ancient Greek Olympic Games, which took place between the 8th century BC and the 4th century AD. The modern games, both summer and winter, take place every 4 years and attract thousands of athletes from over 200 nations. There has always been an element of scandal, including boycotts, doping, bribery, and acts of terror. The 1936 Summer Olympics in Berlin, Germany were used by Hitler to promote his government and his ideals of racial supremacy. In his official Nazi newspaper, he proclaimed that “no Jews or black people” should be allowed to participate.

As a child, the Winter Olympics were always a hot topic in our home, with hockey being the favorite sport to watch. My dad knew many of the players by name, and always sang along with the Russian National Anthem, rarely stumbling on a syllable. And, as we all know, their anthem had its fair share of air time. In the midst of coverage by journalists of dilapidated Russian arenas complete with leaky pipes, puddles of water and no heat, athletes competing in hockey, figure skating and skiing events more often than not appeared to dominate the podium. There was always talk of young athletes being “picked” by the powers that be, then being sent off to some distant city, far from their families to be trained to become a future Olympian. Viktor Tikhonov, the coach of the Russian National team, was also a favorite in our home as he regularly coached his players to victory. In the 1990's, the Detroit Red Wings of the NHL, boasted 5 Russian players. Kozlov, Konstantinov, Larionov, Fetisov, and of course, the dashing Fedorov, the guy with the white skates on his feet and the pretty blonde Russian tennis star on his arm. World Junior Hockey also reigned supreme in our home, with my dad glued to the set, and, as always, rooting for the Russians. And who, in the 1970's, didn't enjoy watching Katarina Witt, the Ace of Spades for the former East Germany, show off her trademark twirls (and figure).

In the 1970's, I became acquainted with Vladimir Posner, the Russian American journalist. Born in Paris and raised in the USA, he had wide media coverage and was often seen on television where he tried to draw parallels between Soviet and Western policies. I even read some of his writings and tried to wrap my head

around his thoughts. Posner appears to now be living in Moscow, and I am sure that he has comfortable surroundings. Putin has come under fire lately for persuading Ukraine to decline an offer to join the European Union. "To join the Union was the best move Poland has made in a long time," my co-worker, a young nurse from Poland recently tells me. I think of my cousin Valentina, living in Ukraine, who, while visiting us in the 1990's was bent and determined to see an African American. With strict racial bylaws in effect in the Soviet Union at the time, she had never seen a person of color. My father was able to make this come true, and she returned home with a souvenir photo, which she hung on the wall in her little cubicle. Although she was university educated economist, she worked in a high rise building in a large city in the Ukraine, which had neither an elevator, nor running water. The outhouse was in the back.

My friend, a die hard Olympic fan who has attended events in the past, tells me that she has her red Canadian Olympic mittens out on the counter as well as pins from the Vancouver Olympics. She even has some Russian stacking dolls. She reminds me that tomorrow Canadian Tire is handing out free Olympic pins "while supplies last." I try to remember where I stored the stacking dolls my cousins brought. The large silver samaroff (?) has long been passed along to some other worthy recipient.

I watch the National CBC News from Sochi, as Peter Mansbridge walks to a row of evergreens only several meters from the main Olympic plaza. "There is a secret back here that no-one wants you to see," he relays, as the camera swoops across a small cemetery. "Russian law prohibits the moving of cemeteries," he continues, as I sit on the couch and chuckle to myself. He then interviews a man who lives close by, yet is no longer able to visit the graves of his family there because he lacks the proper papers. I think of both of my grandfathers, neither of whom I ever knew, both murdered by Stalin in the 1940's, their remains lying somewhere in the Russian wilderness. One account of the demise of my Opa Regehr, given years ago by older folks in the village of Kleefeld, Ukraine, recounted that this particular group of men were forced to run into a lake until they drowned.

My daughter is watching the footage of the Opening Ceremonies in Sochi that occurred earlier today. She is mesmerized by the choreography and the sheer spectacle of the performances. On the local news, we have just seen that the parents of Meghan Agosta have decided to fly to Sochi after all as they give a news interview. Her father, a Sicilian born in Italy, and a childhood friend, regularly greets me with "Sprechen Sie Deutsch?"

Now that the 2014 Winter Games have officially opened, the flags have been waved and the torch has been lit, I will try and follow my father's lead. I will try to put aside all my knowledge of the past of Russia's turbulent history, the controversies and the terror threats of these games, and enjoy the accomplishments of all the athletes who have rightly earned their right to compete in Sochi. One small difference. When the Russian anthem is played (and it will be), I will be unable to sing along...