

## Rome: Our Olympic Adventure – Summer 1960

The whole thing started two years ago, when my husband decided that under no circumstances was he going to miss the 1960 Olympics in Rome. He felt that if he didn't fulfill this lifelong ambition this time, when the games were just a few hours flight from Jerusalem, there was little chance that he ever would.

And so there began a campaign, long before the Olympic Committee itself knew anything about the setup and organization of the Games, which my husband tackled with determination and strategy — to get tickets, and to find suitable accommodation, because you couldn't have one without the other. Letters and cables flew to Rome and to New York, until in the end we found ourselves, through the help of friends, with a private apartment in Parioli, rental paid, and scores of tickets for the Games.

When Alex first broached the project with me, I said rather absently, “Yes, it's a wonderful idea,” and looked on rather unbelievably at the volume of international mail his plan occasioned. When the children learned about it, they insisted, in their budding enthusiasm for sport, that they just had to see the Olympics too. In any case, they thought it was time they saw the big outside world, where Mummy and Daddy went “abroad.” At ages 10, 7 and 4, they eventually had to come along for lack of any other suitable arrangement.

The time sped by, the apartment was reserved, the tickets secured, and still the whole project had an air of unreality for me. I suppose I didn't really want to consider the possibilities and delights of taking three young children to Europe. The project began to take on new dimensions. If we were going to the Olympics, we might as well go to Europe for the summer. Shall we do a car tour? Shall we not? Where to stay? Everything will be so crowded. The kids? The boys were old enough for camp, but what about Varda, our four-year-old?

Inexorably time moved on, and the project with it. Letters went back and forth to Switzerland, to Rome, to hotels and *kinderheims*. I began to get apprehensive. It looked as if the whole thing might really come off. Two and a half months in Europe with the kids! Were we crazy? It was simply a refined form of torture! But the hotel reservations were made, the *kinderheim* had really accepted our brood (will the little one agree to stay?), the plane reservations were made. Our longtime friends Ernst and Dr. Eva Lewin (Landsberger) were expecting us.

There was no turning back. As I bought shoes and sewed in name labels, I kept telling myself it would be all right — they could behave decently when they wanted to — if only they won't fight and squabble all the time — perhaps they'll try not to be so fussy about their food and bed times — maybe it can work out nicely.

Thursday, August 25

At last the great day came, and the opening of the Olympic Games was indeed a wonderful spectacle. The children behaved irreproachably, and we enjoyed ourselves thoroughly. A little careful planning brought us smoothly and comfortably to the stadium, and by half past three we were in our seats with plenty of time to spare. I wonder if there is any other stadium in the world so beautifully situated as Rome's — surrounded by trees and smooth lawns, the famous Marble Stadium on one side, the Olympic swimming and diving pools on the other, and all approached through spacious, elegantly designed piazzas. "Grand" is the only adjective to describe every aspect of this comprehensive sports center.

We sat and watched the tribunes filling up with visitors from all over. Masses of people, speaking a variety of languages, dressed in colorful national costumes. The flags of the participating nations fluttered in the breeze, massed bands supplied music, and helicopters whirred low to get the nearest possible closeups of the scene. Ice cream and cold drink vendors were doing a roaring trade; a buzz of excitement filled the air.

Suddenly a gasp went up from the crowd, and we saw that a young man, clad only in shorts, was running on the fresh red-clay track. For a moment we thought it was a workman hurrying to some forgotten last-minute job, but it soon became obvious that he was actually bent on making a circuit of the field. He was more than halfway round by the time the spectators grasped the fact, that here was a daring young man determined to win some bet, or bent on satisfying some private ambition. They began to cheer him on, and photographers rushed to snap him, which pleased him considerably. Belatedly, some

officials began to give chase, but he finished his round well ahead of them, vaulted the partition and vanished into the crowd of standees. The officials found no trace of him, but he received a hearty round of applause, and everyone felt this was a good omen for the Games — a spirit of daring, of individual effort, of good humor.

The opening ceremony in itself is a simple event. A flag is presented, the Games are declared open, and the Olympic torch is lit. What makes it exciting and moving are the associations underlying the symbols, the spectacle of the thousands of parading athletes in their variously colored uniforms, the color of the massed national flags against the emerald-green field at the center of the red track with its fresh white lines. After three cannon shots reverberated through the air, completely scaring the kids, hundreds of pigeons were released, representing, as they wheeled in the air, man's eternal desire for peace. And when the runner bearing the Olympic flame came in, circled the stadium and lit the enormous torch atop the stands, one could not help but be moved by this impressive reminder of a centuries' long tradition.

When the Israel delegation marched by, the children cheered so vociferously that everyone turned to see who the enthusiastic supporters of this little no-sport-distinguished country were.

When the formalities were over, we wanted to leave quickly to avoid the rush, but the children insisted on staying to the very end. We were glad we gave in, for just before the close came the nicest moment of the afternoon, that typical "Italian" touch. As the host

country was marching out to a tremendous ovation, we suddenly noticed a little spurt of flame in the crowd and at the other side of the stadium. It surely couldn't be a fire! We realized that people were lighting torches made out of newspapers and programs to fete the Italian sportsmen, and as dusk fell the whole stadium was a mass of little glowing flames. It was one of the most charming spontaneous gestures we had ever seen.

Leaving the stadium was not as easy as getting into it. We were caught up in very vocal traffic snarls and were constantly diverted from our planned course so that we kept on finishing up somewhere else. Suddenly we saw a little restaurant, just a few tables on pavement, not crowded *and* with a parking place right in front. We lost no time in discussion and immediately pulled in and had supper. It was well after nine before we arrived home, and tumbled, tired but contented, into bed.

The first week of the Games was wisely devoted mainly to swimming and diving. Many spectators took advantage of the broiling sun to strip to the waist and suntan, and many girls wore bathing suits or brief sun tops. We had good seats, and the children were quickly caught up in the racing fever. Several times during the week, we made a "big day" of it, staying right through from the afternoon to the evening events, and having a quick supper at the cafeteria.

The swimming and diving events were a thrilling sight at night. Illuminated from the bottom up, the diving pool took on a deep turquoise blue, and the swimming pool looked a clear, translucent green. Floodlights lit up the whole area and were reflected in the

water, and the stands on both sides were filled with cheering and barracking crowds.

There were Japanese *en masse* with little Japanese flags, numerous Germans (the largest number of tourists from any single country) with their organized rhythmic cheering, the English with their enthusiastic clapping and quiet “come on there” and the Italians excitedly jumping up and down as they shouted encouragement to their compatriots.

One felt sorry for those competitors from faraway places who had no crowds to cheer them on. The night the Israeli, Shefa, swam in the 400-meter heats, the children nearly went out of their heads with excitement, shouting “*Shefa Yis-ra-el*” till they were hoarse. An American sitting behind us leaned forward, perhaps a little embarrassed by their noise, and said, “What are you shouting for? He’s not even winning?” “We know, but we have to encourage him,” they answered.

The main struggle for swimming honors was between the Australians and Americans, though some surprises were provided by other countries; it was tremendously exciting, especially as my sentiments were still with Australia. One evening we were surprised to find the Echo satellite moving majestically across the sky (though everyone called it a sputnik) clearly visible to the naked eye. It was the first time we’d seen any of the satellites, and it was very exciting to behold, though rather disturbing at the same time.

Another evening we had a big surprise when a group including Elizabeth Taylor, Eddie Fischer and writer Art Buchwald came in not far from us. What a buzzing and standing and craning of our necks! We couldn’t really get a good look at them, but it was

interesting to watch the reactions of the crowd, especially to Ms. Taylor's décolleté. I was fascinated by the ice cream vendor, who just happened to be standing by the row where they sat down. This fellow looked so typical, with his plump face, small mustache and cheerful eyes; he could have played a part in a movie. He stood transfixed as he realized who he was looking at, and couldn't bring himself to move away. And when Mr. Fisher actually bought ice cream from him, he absolutely radiated with glory. It was a good ten minutes before he managed to continue on his way.

The heat continued to be quite exhausting; in fact, it seemed to get worse. Why on earth did they choose Rome in August for the games? The spectators ought to have received medals for attending.

We had assigned seats at the swimming, and began to get acquainted with the people around us, particularly with an attractive woman who sat in front of us. She told us she's Hungarian, but has lived in Italy more than 20 years. I felt she must be Jewish.

The swimming moved into its final stages and became even more exciting as more and more finals and victory ceremonies were held. It is interesting to find that there are many moments of beauty, aside from the competitive aspect. In races where the swimmers are evenly matched, they move down the pool in a perfectly straight line, as if performing a ballet. It was delightful to watch the performances of champions as they put in that extra tremendous spurt and surged forward to victory, sometimes only by inches. In water polo too, a sport which demands stamina and strength, but has an *Alice in Wonderland* air

about it, there were some moments when the teams look like shoals of flying fish as they dove after the ball, or swooped off to protect the goal. These moments of real style and beauty are more relished, since they were so unexpected in competitive sport.

One of the most extraordinary races was the 100-meter freestyle, which was fought out between Devitt of Australia and Larsen of the USA. The crowd was shrieking and yelling as they swam the last 50 meters neck and neck, and it was impossible to see who had won. Larsen and the crowd thought he had it, and he was photographed and congratulated. The jury gave the photo-finish to Devitt, to his own and everyone else's surprise. There was an appeal but the original decision held.

I finally solved the riddle of the tapless washbasins in the cloakrooms. The water is operated by a foot pressure mechanism! So modern that I, and many others, didn't think of looking for such a thing and thought they'd just forgotten to install the taps. It took me a week to notice the chrome button on the floor. There also seems to be a strange shortage of toilet paper in Italy, as it is never supplied in public toilets, but is thrust at you, rationed by the attendant, as you enter.

#### Thursday, September 1

The athletic events started, and our sons are very impressed by what they have seen; they were just beginning to get an idea of what "serious" sport means. Like most Israelis, they thought sport begins and ends with football, but now they see that there are many other fields for magnificent individual endeavor. The children have begun to ask for milk, so

even if only for this, the trip has been worthwhile. One of the most exciting events so far was the high jump, which turned into a tense and dramatic struggle between three Russians and the American favorite, Thomas. By the time it entered into the final phase, all other events were over, and the attention of the one hundred thousand spectators focused on this one spot. A gasp went up when Thomas failed to clear at 2.14-meter height and only made third place, when he had been expected to set a new Olympic and world record. Obviously, against three Russians he was at a psychological disadvantage, but it is also true that form alone is not enough for competitive sport, and one must also have nerves of steel and tremendous self-control to withstand the pressure and excitement.

#### Friday, September 2

This was a day of tremendous excitement and incredible performances on the track. The Americans took all three places in the 400-meter hurdles as if in revenge for Thomas' defeat the day before and, indeed, before the race we had seen them clasp hands as if in a pact to do so. The unknown American Wilma Rudolph, who never walked until the age of eight because of polio, made a magnificent sprint in the 100-meter dash to defeat the Russian favorite, Itkina, and became the fastest woman in the world. New Zealand surprised everyone by taking two gold medals in the 800-meter and 5,000-meter races, and the senior member of our family got so carried away with Halberg's performance that he began a persistent one-man cheer for him — there not being many New Zealanders to encourage him. But after a few moments, a group of Germans began to shout him down, but it didn't help their man and Halberg won beautifully.

The German cheer with its Hi-Hi-Hi Cha-Cha-Cha has become the joke of the Games and has provoked others to follow suit. The Americans counter by insisting on singing their anthem right through to the end at each medal awards ceremony, and they had many opportunities last night when they won the men's high diving, the women's mixed relay, and the men's 200-meter butterfly. We also saw Jon Konrads and Murray Rose win their heats of the 1,500-meter freestyle.

During this race, which took over 17.5 minutes, we had plenty of time to enjoy the perfection of Rose's style, the easy grace of his strokes in their unfailing rhythmic steadiness. One could also hear, for the first time, in the quiet, which accompanied this swim, the soft splashing of the water as hands dipped and rose, like soft waves against an island shore. It was an unexpectedly aesthetic pleasure, but probably the final will not be so quiet.

My feelings about the Hungarian lady were right after all. This evening she inquired after relatives who live in Jerusalem, a well known academic and religious family, who originally came from Frankfurt. She told us that she is married to an Italian and we have now met the whole family.

On Sunday we finally had time off from sport to take the children to those "musts" for Jewish visitors to Rome, Michelangelo's statue of *Moses*, and the Arch of Titus. Just as we started up the romantic looking stairway, which leads from Via Cavour to the Church

of St. Pietro-in-Vinculi, we were surprised to see emerging from the shadows above us a grand-looking Hassid with a long grey beard and satin *kapote*, accompanied by two young yeshiva boys with long black *peyot* twisted behind their ears. It was a most unexpected sight, and I am sure they were equally surprised when we said “shalom” as we passed. Could it be they were on the same mission upon which we were now bent? I suspected we would meet the same trio at the Arch of Titus, and sure enough, we did.

The children were fascinated by Michelangelo’s *Moses* , as they had been by his *David* in Florence, and when the middle one, aged seven, turned to me and said that the works of Michelangelo (he pronounced it in Hebrew) were the nicest of any he had seen, I once again felt our whole summer trip had been justified. We spent some ten to fifteen minutes at the Titus Arch, making that symbolic pilgrimage which has grown in significance since the establishment of the State, and which demonstrates the history of the Jews more forcefully than any number of books or lectures. Judging from the scratching on the stones, it is the rendezvous of Jews from all over the world, and in the few minutes we were there we met two Hebrew-speaking couples from Israel, an American couple on their way to Israel, and the aforementioned Hassidim.

We are well into the second week of the Games, and we went off early yesterday morning to see the *Grand Prix de Dressage*. One has to know a great deal about horse riding and training to understand and appreciate this event, and it was interesting, but not quite our “cup of tea.” However, it was an odd sight to see the Russian entry appear in

full riding habit, including that supreme symbol of corrupt aristocracy at leisure, a red hunting jacket. Eventually, he actually won this event.

### Friday, September 9

The weather had turned quite cool, and we went off to the stadium armed with raincoats and umbrellas — we just couldn't miss the 10,000-meter race or the finals of the relays! The temperature dropped steadily and soon a steady rain set in, but the spectators remained faithful and sat through the events under a forest of umbrellas. This was the afternoon the American team, though they finished first, was disqualified in the 400-meter relay. In the evening we took the boys to basketball, as promised, our daughter having graciously consented (with bribery) to stay home. It took almost an hour to reach the Palazzo del Sport and in the crazy Italian traffic, I was surprised we got there at all.

What a delightful surprise the Palazzo turned out to be, surely one of the most elegant of indoor sports venues. It was a beautifully modern circular building, while the inside revealed an enormous, subtly illuminated umbrella-like roof, and no pillars to block the view, and comfortable cushioned seats. It was our first experience of basketball, and we found it a fast, enjoyable game, but I would place it in the same category as water polo — somewhat incomprehensible. The umpire whistles constantly, for no apparent reason most of the time. The 20-minute half could stretch to an hour because of the arguments and penalties, and the players can be changed at will. We had thought the spectators at the water polo were vocal — but here — my goodness!

The last two days were devoted to the finals of the individual gymnastics, which were held in the Baths of Caracalla. At the women's final we witnessed one of the most extraordinary displays of spectator rebellion against the judges, which was matched in intensity by the uproar when the Russian in the long jump refused to shake hands with the American Negro whom he had defeated to third place. The Russian was so thoroughly booed that he actually broke down and wept.

At the gymnastics, the crowd was much taken by the originality and flair of the Japanese gymnast and completely outraged by the low points allotted her. They were really angry, and kept up a frenzied booing, hooting and whistling for more than 15 minutes, preventing any announcements from being heard, and keeping the competitors from continuing. Perhaps it was not a sporting demonstration, but the judges were not "sporting" either. It was obvious from this and later events that the judges (the majority being from Iron Curtain countries) were not impartial. They sat through the demonstration like graven images, though it seemed possible that they might be lynched at any moment.

Eventually order was restored, but the crowd lost no opportunity of showing Miss Ikeda that they thought she had been mistreated. Gymnastics is a beautiful and graceful form of sport, and the Russian girls in royal blue, low-cut leotards were slim and attractive. We were fascinated at the men's finals by the Russian called Yeheskel Portnoi. Somebody told us that there were 80 Jewish sportsmen in the Russian delegation, and we thought what a strong group it would be if they, and the Jewish competitors of other countries,

had appeared in one delegation. We had also learned from someone who sat closer to the German bloc than we did that the amusing cheer is actually a corruption of the old Nazi salute, *Sieg Heil*, with the Cha-cha-cha tagged on for fun, disguise or what-have-you.

The Seventeenth Olympic Games finished. And the Rafaelis too were just about finished. *The tumult and the shouting dies...* The races have been run, new records established, medals awarded. The closing ceremony was preceded by the finals of the horse jumping in which the horses proved they could be as temperamental as athletes, and the Russians were booed off the field for whipping their animals.

The closing ceremony was perhaps not as spectacular as the opening, but nevertheless was beautiful in its own way. Twilight approached as the flag bearers marched into the stadium and as night fell, the great floodlights were lit and the whole scene took on a special glow under the night sky. The flags of Greece, Italy and Japan were raised, in honor of the originating country, the host country, and the next host country. When the respective anthems were played, the Italians proudly joined in singing theirs, which sounds like an operatic aria and is certainly the most musical of any we have heard in the last two weeks.

Again as at the opening, people began to light thousands of little flames that flickered in the dark. Suddenly, six projectors shot beams across the sky making a backdrop for the three flags and the Olympic flame, and welding into one single entity all the various

elements of the wonderful scene. Then the lights went on, the cannon roared, the flame was extinguished and the Olympic flag was ceremoniously carried out.

It was all over. The suitcases were packed and our summer adventure had come to an end. Two Olympic expressions have taken root in the family vocabulary — *a vostri posti* meaning “on your marks” and *tutti sedutti*, meaning “hey you, in front, sit down.” The boys have learnt to identify lots of flags, and have decided they must one day win a gold medal for Israel. And we felt we deserved a medal ourselves for having survived our summer project, without major mishap.